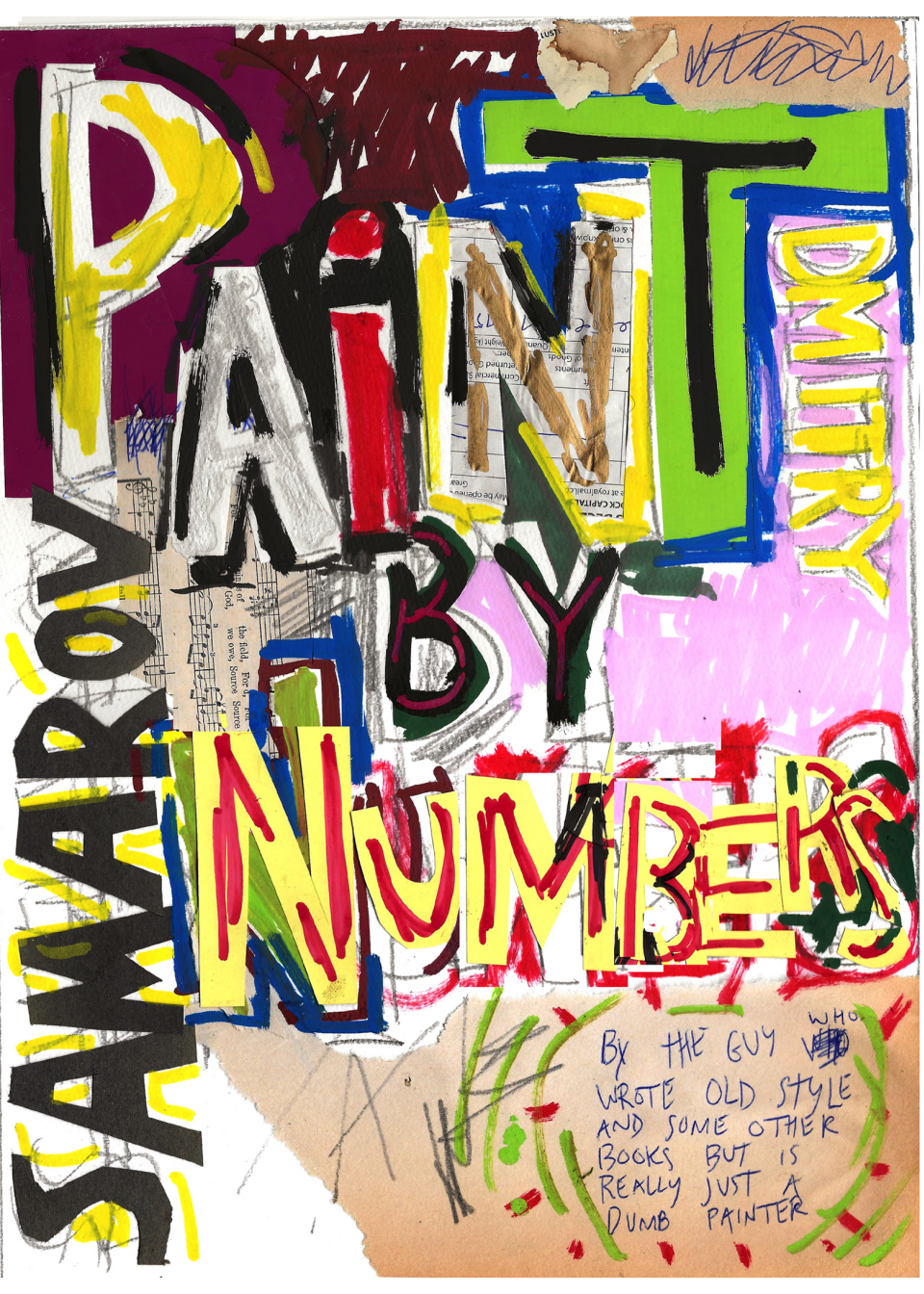




SAVOR

BY

DMITRY

NUMBERS

BY THE GUY WHO
WROTE OLD STYLE
AND SOME OTHER
BOOKS BUT IS
REALLY JUST A
DUMB PAINTER

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All resemblances to “real” people are entirely malicious and intentional. Fuck ‘em if they can’t take a joke.

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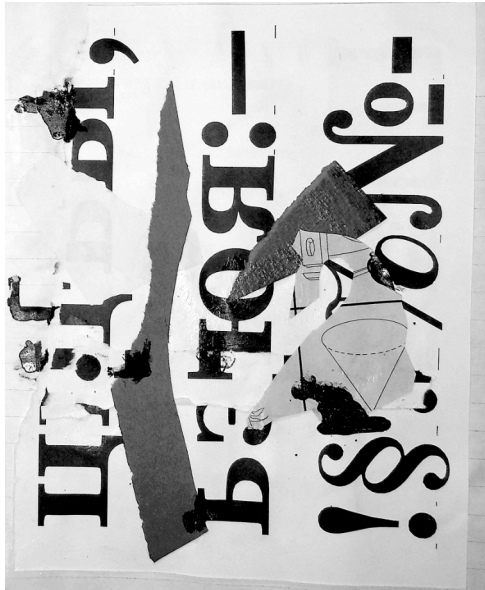
Why can't monsters get along with other monsters?
—Silver Jews

THROKLEY, WILLFITZ & GOIES LLP

Re: Timothy Carey/Orso Article

To the editors of the *Chicago Repeater*:

As Timothy Carey and Orso informed you earlier this week, Throkley, Willfitz & Goies LLP, represents Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso. We write to support Mr. Carey's and Mr. Orso's—rightful—concerns with the *Chicago Repeater's* threatened publication of an article. The threat to publish the current draft provided to Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso constitutes an anticipatory breach of an unambiguous promise on which Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso relied made by the reporter—and for which you are responsible as a matter of law. Without that promise—the gist of which was that the article would not falsely attribute to Mr. Carey or convey that Mr. Carey sought to antagonize a stalker whom Mr. Carey properly fears, or detail intimate details of Mr. Orso's love life while Mr. Orso was estranged from his wife—Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso would never have provided access, information and cooperation to the *Chicago Repeater*. You have now stated that you intend to publish precisely the type of story Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso said could not be published in exchange for access to them. If you follow through on your threat, you will be in violation of the law under Supreme Court precedent going back nearly twenty-five years. You will also—as you know—put a chronically ill man in physical danger and cast aspersions on the reputation of a universally-beloved



pillar of Chicago's art community. There really should be no need to do that. But because you have not yet agreed to remove the problematic and wholly unnecessary portions of the article, we write.

We urge you to think carefully about your actions before you publish.

The reporter of your story, Dimtry Samarov, approached Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso about doing a profile of them, their art, poetry, acting and music. Mr. Samarov expressed a desire to highlight Mr. Carey's and Mr. Orso's work and to correct the egregious injustices perpetrated by various local and national media outlets over the past decade. These articles, stories, videos and multimedia presentations had cast Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso in a false light and—critically here—antagonized particular individuals. As a result Mr. Carey has lived in fear of his physical safety and Mr. Orso has stopped enjoying the lifestyle to which he has become accustomed (and which, he richly deserves due to his tireless efforts in service of art, poetry and the general uplift of the community.)

Accordingly, Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso agreed to participate in developing this story under specific conditions. For example, Mr. Carey has stated that any discussion of the stalker issue would have to come from an objective third-party perspective. Additionally, Mr. Orso stipulated that no reference be made in the article to Mr. Orso's visits to massage parlors—be they of the happy- or sad-ending variety. Nor any mention of the frequency of said visits. To that end, Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso further conditioned their willingness to be interviewed by Mr. Samarov on the latter's agreement to give absolute veto authority over specific content.

Mr. Samarov expressly agreed, in writing, to both Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso and their respective assistants and proxies, that he would not publish or post anything unless it was first approved by Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso. Critically, Mr. Samarov also promised that nothing would be attributed to Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso that was not Mr. Carey's and Mr. Orso's own assertions. Only on these bases did Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso consent to the interview and their participation in writing the profile, including the use of reproductions of Mr. Carey's and Mr. Orso's artwork.

Repeatedly affirming the agreement, Mr. Samarov sent Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso multiple drafts of the profile that was to be submitted for publication, for Mr. Carey's and Mr. Orso's review. Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso reviewed drafts which appeared to minimally comply with their conditions for participation. For example, the drafts did not refer to individuals by name, and did not attribute to Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso statements made by others.

After the profile was submitted to the *Chicago Repeater*, however, all promises were broken. Mr. Samarov provided Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso with a revised draft of the story that had been approved by the *Chicago Repeater's* editorial staff. The editors were well aware of Mr. Carey's and Mr. Orso's conditions for participation. Not only did the revised article identify individuals and locations by name, it falsely attributed statements made by third parties—including the opinions of psychiatrists, criminalists and social workers who have examined this situation—to Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso. This is but one example of misattribution in this story. Worse still, and to the complete horror of Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso, Mr. Samarov has announced that his editor had required him to contact certain individuals, that he had done so, and that these individuals had reacted negatively, as Mr.

Carey and Mr. Orso predicted, and as any reasonable person would have anticipated.

Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso had placed the above clear and reasonable conditions on their participation because of the very real threat these individuals pose to them and those around them. The *Chicago Repeater* knew about Mr. Carey's and Mr. Orso's intense and justifiable fear of these individuals. It knew that the reporter held himself out as acting for the *Chicago Repeater*. It knew the content of the promise. If the story is published with the individuals' names included, or with any misattributed statements, you, the Chicago Repeater, Mr. Samarov and all other *Chicago Repeater* employees and agents involved with the writing and editing of this story will be breaching the clear agreement made with Mr. Carey and Mr. Orso.

[more re legal, moral and financial consequences to Mr. Samarov et al to follow forthwith under separate cover...]

Signed,
Joseph Goies, Esq.

cc: Dimtry Samarov
Timothy Carey
Orso



How would you feel if you got a letter like this?

I'd spent months, nearly a year, working on an article about two artists I'd looked up to. I thought we were friends. Turns out I didn't know shit about them or how things actually work.

Who are these people who are so damn upset? Are they worth remembering or remarking on? Who am I to them? Who are they to me? Who am I, anyway? I'll try to make the whole stupid thing clear. But I have to warn you: I'm super biased. I have skin in the game. Opinions. Feelings. I'm anything but an impartial observer. I'm up to my neck in the mire of this thing. No matter what I say in the following pages, however hard I try to hold myself above the fray, I'm guilty as fuck. There's a whole backroom of axes being ground to nubs and shavings.

If you want objectivity, I urge you to stop reading right now. That said, I promise to be as even-handed as I can be in relating events that caused me pain and damaged me, personally and professionally. The after-effects reverberate to today and will continue to for the foreseeable future. It's the pitfall of involving yourself with others. No way to escape unblemished or unscathed.

You already know how the story ends. The letter from the lawyers spells it out. If you're curious how/why it happened, read on. Fragments. Bits and pieces. No heroes, nor villains. Few victories; moral or otherwise. A collage of flotsam adding up to a picture of some people I used to know.

How we helped and hurt one another.

When I was little I drew animals off the TV. An old man in a captain's cap showed me how. He lived in a shanty by the harbor and made it look easy. But it wasn't easy for me. I ripped through the typing paper my mother gave me every week. I hated what I came up with. My bear looked mangled, the ram lame, the eagle lacked sufficient plumage to soar. But my mother loved each one as if she'd given birth to them. They lived on our refrigerator before being sent to the framer's. These malformed animals form the beginning of an art collection that now covers every available surface of my childhood home.

I would've had an easier time of it those early mornings in front of the TV if I knew what I know now. That the old man had those sketches all worked out beforehand. It was a step-by-step process refined over years, lifted, then customized, from the TV artists who came before him. Jon Gnagy was the first. He looked like a beatnik, with a worried cast to his glance. He was a self-taught veteran just back from the war. He worked out a way to render flora and fauna quickly and easily within his allotted forty-four minutes, stepping away from the easel to live-read copy the sponsors supplied him with. He never got the hang of drawing people. After he met and married his wife, he had her put in the rare figure required in his creations. He drew a western vista with a couple horses idling on a clearing in the foreground, then call off-camera and summon her to put a couple cowboys straddling the steeds. It was a rare symbiotic personal/professional partnership. They kept on that way until his show lost audience share and the network canceled it. He took to sleeping in the workshed/studio in back of their property. With the Rockies as a background below an endless sky, all Gnagy cared about was that his tumbler of Old Crow was full. His wife let him mope a few months, but when he started hitting her, she packed her suitcase.



Gnagy was long forgotten when Bob Ross hit screens across the nation. Ross was also a veteran, but Vietnam rather than WWII. He didn't Brylcreem his hair, preferring a natural poof of red that would make Bozo think him a relation. His program was in color, the better to accentuate the garish tints he slathered onto canvas to make bucolic scenes appear beneath his palette knife. He never seemed nervous like Gnagy. Either he wasn't worried about it, or, more likely, just stoned enough not to care. His branded painting kits sold in the millions. Magic White and Happy Clouds decorated living rooms across the nation.

But by the time I found out about Ross, I was through drawing off the TV.

I'd graduated to reckoning with reality.

Now I curse the ugly marks in my sketchbook after looking down from the busker playing at the downtown subway stop. He doesn't acknowledge me because I haven't left a cent in his open guitar case, though I've been standing here half an hour. I keep tearing the pages out, throwing them down on the floor, then starting over. I want it to be right, to show how his music makes me feel, but I never can.

And never will.



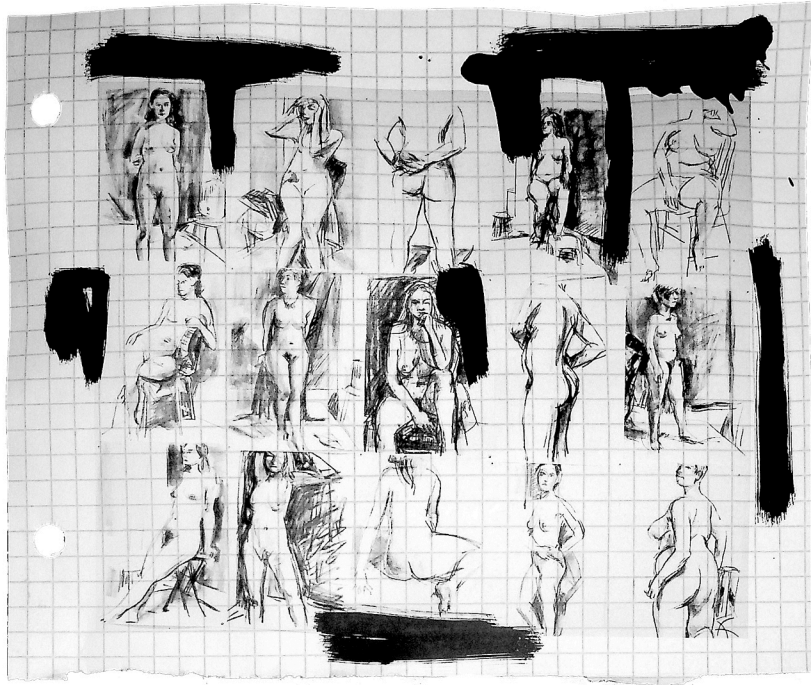
The horn player grew up in a dying industrial town. His father, an amateur piano player in the hot-jazz vernacular, worked at the town's last unshuttered factory to put food on their table. The old man was bitter about his dead dreams and took it out on his sensitive little boy. If he couldn't have what he wanted, had to go to a job he hated because he forgot to wear a rubber the wrong time, the little fucker had to share some of the pain. Never too early for a life lesson. It fucks you and fucks you and fucks you so you have to learn to fuck it back, or, at the very least, to make others regret, to pay for it, not to get off scot free.

His mother, a frustrated painter, put all her unfulfilled dreams into him. He was her precocious golden boy. He could do no wrong. Any turn of his immature imagination she celebrated as genius. He grew up never to doubt himself and his abilities. She told him every night before bed that he would grow up to everyone knowing and admiring him. And he knew it had to be so.

He always believed what his mother told him.

Today, in his studio, I nod at the thing on his table that he says is beautiful. I've learned noncommittal gestures in lieu of voicing an opinion. I can't lie about art. I've been at it too long. It's the only thing I believe in. The reason I draw breath. I can't tell the big lug what I think of his things. I like him and want him to like me. If I said what I knew to be so, we'd never speak again. I'd be dead to him. Orso doesn't accept criticism. Any attempt to burst his bubble is met with childish anger. As long as you don't push back, he's the best guy in the world.

Don't question, don't doubt, then everything's A-okay.



The stalker didn't start out a stalker. He was a stranger, then an admirer, then an acolyte, then a friend. The horn player collected fans like flies. They ran after him like puppies. Hung on his every word. Close-read anything he published or recorded. Had bitter talmudic debates. Fought to ingratiate themselves to him at every opportunity.

The stalker thought art was his calling. He drew the female form from life. He often thought he was born the wrong century. It was a way to explain why nobody cared about his art. Why he wasn't famous. He couldn't allow himself to consider the possibility that he just wasn't that good. Pull on that thread and you start questioning your purpose for drawing breath. He'd convinced himself when he was little that drawing was his thing. It started Saturday mornings, copying the nature art guy on TV. His parents, immigrants who were out of the house to work before he and his sister even woke up, didn't encourage him. They didn't know about Michelangelo or Rubens. When he brought his dad his latest, his dad could barely keep his eyes open, asleep in his chair with the newspaper in his lap, news-radio on. His mother said something vaguely positive, but mostly, he sensed, to placate him, getting him out of her way as she finished housework, dead on her feet. Nobody cared about his stupid drawings and nobody ever would. Until he met Carey.

They met on the handball court. Both were part of a loose group who met a few times a week for pick-up games. He idolized the older man and after a time began to think of him as a mentor.

He could never tell for sure what Carey thought of him except that he could tell Carey enjoyed being looked up to. Seemed less alive without an audience. That was okay.

So long as Carey paid attention, it was worth it.

The horn player's name isn't really Carey and the famous Chicago artist's isn't Orso, but, as you already know, there are lawyers involved, so that's what I'm calling them. I could risk using the stalker's real name, but that could get confusing. Might accidentally let other given names slip. So the only "real" name I use is my own.

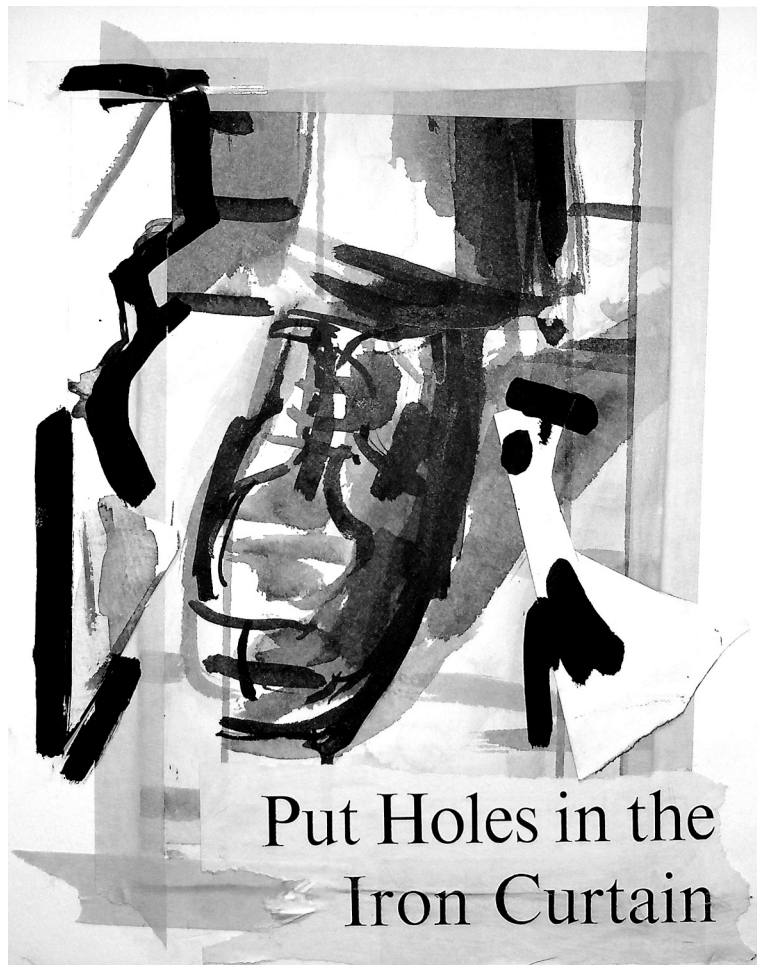
You know the actor Timothy Carey? He was a sniper in *The Killing*, then towards the end of his life he was in a couple Cassavetes flicks. He always played unhinged maniacs. Imagine that face, but under heavy sedation, and you get what the horn player looked like the first time I saw him in the movies.

Because of how things ended between us, I can't tell you his name. So, because I think it's funny and know he'd hate it, I'll call him Carey. The vain fucker would go apeshit if he ever found out. But he's not much of a reader, so I'm not worried about it.

The Orso thing is a little more convoluted. In point of fact, bears aren't the only subject of the man's work, but in the interest of brevity, and, because he favors them, that's what I'm calling him. Like Carey, he has no capacity to laugh at himself, so I'll do the laughing for him. Artists are often ludicrous away from the easel. All that sustained creative focus skews us in the off hours. When you spend days, decades harnessing entire model universes, it's tough to switch the god thing off. You hear your wife yelling at you to do the dishes and it makes no sense. Does she even comprehend who or what you are?

Anyhow, there's Carey, Orso, the stalker, and me. Your main characters, in case you're keeping score. It might not always be obvious who's saying or doing what, but that's okay. We're sort of interchangeable.





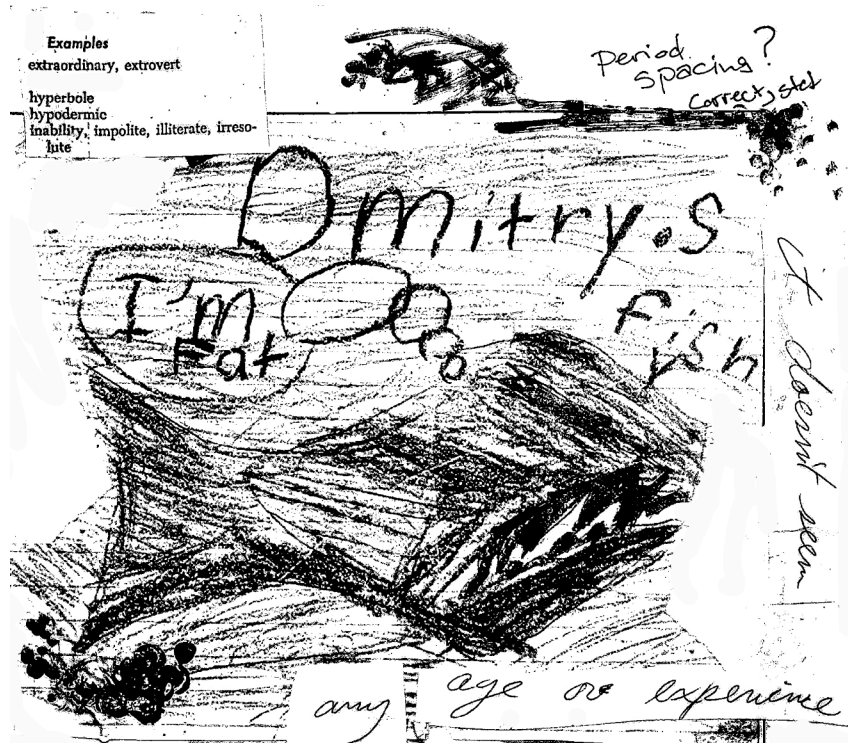
They're the coolest of the cool cats. Their shit doesn't stink. They give zero fucks. You want to be just like them. You go to thrift stores to find threads like theirs. So ugly they're pretty. Clashing patterns that make music from the friction, the way they rub the wrong way. Looking like them is as important as being whatever you think they are.

You build them up. You can't help it. Because they play the song that nails what you feel. They make the movie you think is about you. They paint the picture you wish you'd painted. The one you vow you'll paint one day. You owe it to yourself, to the world, whatever that is. Otherwise, why are you even here?

They shine the light to show you the way, so they themselves must be great too, or, at least good, right? Then you meet them. You think it's funny when Oz says to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. But now you're back there with the miserable fucker. It's ruining years of good memories. It's making you rethink what you are. The pillars on which you cobble together your identity. If this shithead made the thing that matters more to you than anything else, what does that say about you? You've been building a temple to a monster believing them a god. Do you demolish the entire edifice? Or salvage a brick or two? A façade? A doorway?

If they're the bad guy, does it negate everything they've done? Don't they rise above themselves when they compose? Or is every single note tied like a millstone to their human flaws? Aren't they a channel for something bigger when they put pen to paper?

I wish I'd never met them when I think about this shit.



The only cred I got all my life was from drawing. It went back to third or fourth grade when Mikey Cugini said I was a *wicked good abtist*. The thing is that my so-called talent only made me feel more of a stranger. I've never learned how to parlay the art thing into social capital. It's what I envy in Orso and Carey. They strut around like king shit and get women to love them.

That sounds fucking terrible. Like I want to trick people into loving me without doing anything to earn or deserve it. It's unfair. I don't really know what those guys have paid for what I see as their success and swagger. How many pages they had to initial, what they owe to which devil. Maybe it's too much. Not a price I could pay even if I had the chance.

I sit down table from Orso as he spins a horseshit yarn to a nineteen year old art girl. Her mother's one of his collectors. He's known this girl since she was in diapers. He's been patient. Now he's leaning his fat face right up to her ear. Whispering things that make her blush. I look away. Yesterday, I let this same girl order Long Islands on her fake ID and bitch about the creepy old guy eye-fucking her all day at her work-study gig. But tonight she's eating it up. Or pretending to. Maybe she has an agenda. A bigger goal that calls for allowing a fat man his mother's age to slobber over her. I hope it's worth it.

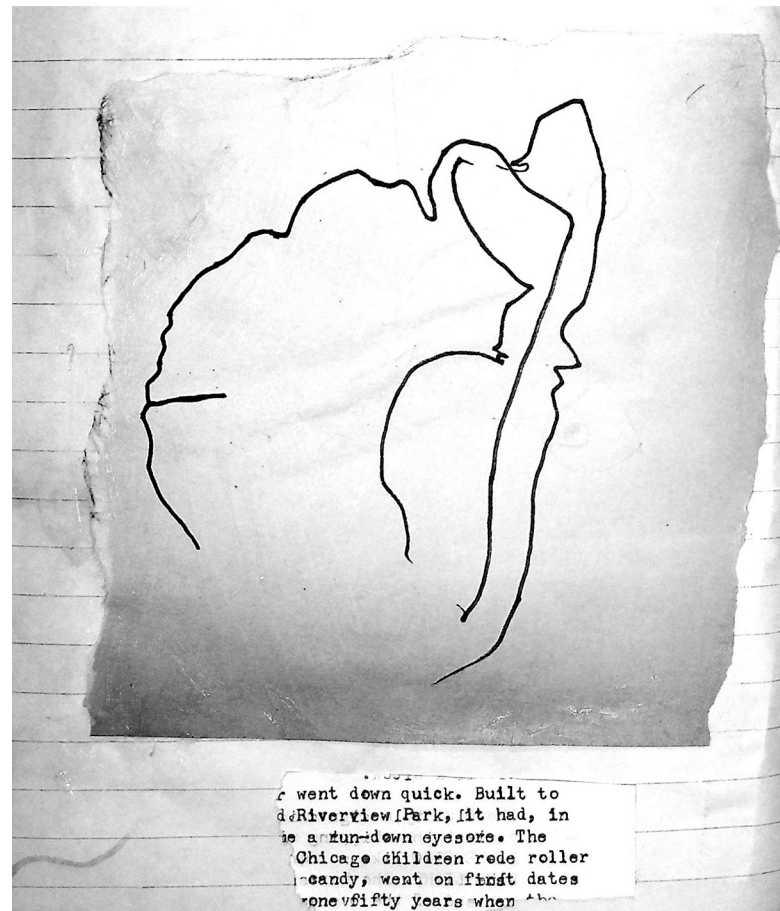
I had a roommate in art school who claimed his sister was married to Dennis Hopper. He told anyone who'd listen and so far as I know no one ever made him prove it. I don't know if anyone believed him; I never did. But it was a long time ago and there was no easy way to check.

The other day I thought of him for the first time in a long time. I'd forgotten his name, but was able to retrieve it with a few clicks in a search engine. Then I looked up Dennis Hopper's wiki page. Sure enough. The name and dates matched. My roommate's sister was indeed married to him for a short time.

Back when we lived together, nobody I knew could conceive of knowing somebody from the movies, much less the Easy Rider himself. We never questioned the guy when he told his tall tale because we cared about him and figured he needed his lies due to deep-seated lack. What purpose would it serve to pop his balloon? Another classmate was obsessed with *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Photos of Charles Laughton, Marlon Brando, Richard Harris, Clark Gable, and Franchot Tone covered his walls. He wrote plays about them and dressed in a striped sailor's shirt every day. Nobody ever gave him grief for his fixation. We were art students. Oddity was expected.

If Dennis Hopper's ex-brother-in-law *was* showing off, name-dropping, he wasn't just repeating a fantasy. So what does it say about me that I doubted him? I can name-drop myself now and I'm sometimes accused of doing so. But is it name-dropping if the famous guy is really your friend? Is the polite/humble thing to do to give the famous friend a boring, ordinary pseudonym? To pretend he's not known by millions the world over? Is that better than telling the truth and not being believed? Or maybe to refuse the famous guy's friendship on principle. Explain the problems his friendship will pose for me.

He'll understand. Probably happens to him all the time.



Orso got his initial taste of fame after he did album art for a protest singer. He has lawyers like the rest, so let's call him Lil' Woodie. Woodie made his bones balladeering about misbegotten junkies and losers. He wailed righteously about the plight of the plebes, but when it came time to pay the little people he hired himself, he cried poor.

When Woodie comes to town, Orso throws him a dinner at a steakhouse. He sits me next to the wife of the guest of honor. She's a beautiful folk-pop singer half her husband's age. His fifth marriage; her first. When they divorce two years later, the tabloids are paid off not to run photos of her bruised-up face. Woodie is Orso's hero.

Inhaling chunks of aged ribeye, Orso regales the table with war stories from the barricades of the art world. Heroic reckonings in which our hero stands up to craven, sissified gallery owners to insist on a fair share of the incalculable profits they rack up off his genius. He saves the nigger jokes for the studio. There are potential collectors here who might look unfavorably upon his less evolved side.

Woodie's wife doesn't say a word. She smiles politely at our host's anecdotes. She knows her job among these important men is to sit and look pretty. Woodie used to pay attention to her words when they were courting, but since paperwork and rings bound her to him in the eyes of government and press, he buries himself in the flickering iPhone screen whenever she opens her mouth. Orso and his wife are on the outs since a barista at his favorite coffee spot sent her an envelope full of printed out MMS snaps of Orso's member—left at the shop in lieu of a tip for his double black-eye. He's got a gallerina by his side tonight. She hasn't opened her mouth all night except to part her lips just enough to siphon off a series of multi-colored martinis.

Woodie's in town to play a show celebrating the release of his latest opus, a tribute to a slain working-class hero or civil rights casualty, I think. I don't keep up. I tried listening to his record once and the sanctimony practically oozed from the speakers. I like my rock stars less proud of

their flaws and unaware of their ideals, rather than taking every chance to remind me of how they're on the right side of history. Unlike us squares.

Orso picks up the check and invites everyone over to his loft after the show. Timmy the cabbie pulls up in his American United and drives Orso and his crew to the Chicago Theatre. I unlock my bike and pedal home. I wonder why he keeps inviting me to these dinners. I lend him no prestige, don't schmooze, don't look good or dress well. Maybe he thinks he's schooling me for art-world success according to his lights. It's a lost cause and he's bound to catch on soon.

But I can't turn up my nose at free steak. That would be ugly and ungrateful.





An email from the Museum of Only Art Now asking if I'd be interested in giving their artist-in-residence a tour of Chicago seems like a prank. I've spent years talking trash about MOAN and MOAN has had little curiosity about my work and even less curiosity about my opinion of them. It's a reasonable arrangement. A sort of mutually-agreed-upon and reciprocated indifference.

So what do they want me for now?

An intern explains that M Tee (the artist-in-residence) wants to see the Chicago beyond the Magnificent Mile, the real Chicago. They thought of me because I'd been a cabdriver in town for years. In fact, I think they thought I still drove a cab. Maybe they thought a tour of the city in a cab would appeal to Tee? Fit in with her work somehow? In any case, this is too odd a proposal for me to refuse. I agree but tell the intern I no longer drive a cab. They offer to rent a vehicle, so we're on.

As the date of the tour approaches, I try to get some clue as to what is expected of me. I google Tee to get some idea of what her work is like without getting any definite impression. She seems to do all sorts of things and there's a lot of heavy-duty language attached to a lot of it. I do learn that she's from the Eastern Bloc, but currently lives in England. Perhaps immigration can be a point of connection for us. I keep asking the intern, but get no definitive answers. The tour route is up to me.

I pick up Tee and curator Walther Stroelphraege at the side of MOAN's hulking edifice. I blast the A/C to combat the unseasonably hot afternoon. They're relieved as they climb in. I ask Tee where she wants to go and she says it's up to me, so I head west toward Humboldt Park.

My plan is to show them a bit of the Emerald Necklace, the system of parks and boulevards planned in the late 1800s by Olmsted. It's one of the first urban green space plans and lays across many Chicago neighborhoods. We pass below the Paseo Boricua gates on Division and on into Humboldt Park. I take the boulevard north to show off the lagoon and fieldhouse. By the statue of Humboldt himself, they decide to park and walk around a bit. Tee wants to know why his statue is here. Alexander Von Humboldt never set foot in Chicago but because the area used to have a large German population a local booster installed it as a symbol of ethnic pride. They take a bunch of pictures around the statue.

Stroelphraege and Tee discuss various upcoming exhibitions and projects. They've been working together for some time. The thing about the art world—or much of any kind of world, for that matter—is that it really is about who you know. I've been making art for forty years, yet what they're talking about may as well be quantum mechanics or sharecropping for how little it relates to what I do. I try to find out how they'll be using our little trip for their work but never find out.

We drive south through Garfield Park, past its gorgeous Spanish Revival fieldhouse, on into Lawndale. I want to show them the Sears Tower. Not the one now called Willis, but the original one on Homan, near Roosevelt Road. This was once the center of Sears & Roebuck's vast empire, the place from which thousands and thousands of catalogs were distributed all over the country to fill the minds of the populace with aspirational dreams. Now the grounds are quiet, occupied partially by city and county agencies of various types, and the tower itself stands alone, traces of once-attached structures visible on its southern wall. We walk right up to it and peer into the dimly-lit lobby. There's a security desk within, but few signs of life. Stroelphraege mentions Detroit.

The word *Detroit* is enough to summon a flood of images and ideas, most of them negative. For a certain kind of artist, there's an attraction or romance to ruin and decay. Elevating falling-apart and failure is a kind of fetish with them. I don't know whether this is the case with Tee and Stroelphraege, but it isn't my intent to lead them on a misery safari.

Our next stop is the massive complex of criminal courts and jail facilities around 26th and California. I tell them that "Going to California" in Chicago has nothing to do with catching some sun. We make a loop south on California Ave, then west on 31st Street, north on Kedzie, and east on 26th Street. This is the main drag of Little Village, the largest Mexican neighborhood in the city and as lively as the area around the jail is ominous. Jarring contrasts are a huge part of this city. There's some talk about the evils of America as we leave the area and head toward Hyde Park. We're looking for a place to stop for a snack and Stroelphraege suggests a coffee shop at 63rd and Woodlawn, downstairs from his apartment.

A couple hours in I still have no firm feeling about the purpose of our trip. There's some talk of making a comedy set in the Chicago art world; maybe they're auditioning me for a part. Who knows.

I point the car toward Pullman. George Pullman built his strange quasi-utopian worker's village here and provided many Blacks a chance out of poverty and second-class citizenship.

What's left is a mixture of dilapidated ruin and neat, cared-for row housing. It's a place where Chicago's past, present, and future intersect. There have been plans to revive the area for years and there are indications in the neighborhood that maybe it'll finally happen. Tee and Stroelphraege remark upon how nice and calm it is here. Most of Chicago's "bad" neighborhoods are filled with people just living their lives day to day. It's not as sensational a picture as drug-war shoot outs, deep-dish pizza, or Al Capone, but it's the city I know and love.

Our last stop is Calumet Fisheries, on the southeastern tip of the city. Of all the places I take them they like this place best. They take dozens of pictures of the bridges and industrial edifices visible in every direction. They eat breaded shrimp on the picnic table outside the fish shack and thank me for taking them around.

We take South Chicago north, then Jeffrey, and on to Lake Shore Drive back downtown. As we pull up to MOAN's side entrance, Stroelphraege asks how often I visit the museum and is surprised to hear I haven't been inside in years.



Timothy Carey: no I never took lessons my mother taught art and what she did somehow—not sure how—but I was able to hold on to that thing that makes children's paintings so wonderful and i was able to do it with confidence

Dmitry Samarov: You've mentioned Klee and Breugel in a couple places as painters that spoke to you. Are there any other painters that move you these days? Not in terms of inspiration or source material but just as a person looking at a thing that speaks to him, you know?

TC: No one really comes to mind. I see stuff all the time that I notice but no one who hits me solidly on the head. I go online and look at stuff by the Pwerle sisters. Minnie being my favorite. I have never seen their stuff in person. Jackson Pollock a little while ago shocked me. You know I always liked Jackson Pollock and after you haven't seen his stuff for a while you think about the concept of how he made the work and not much else. But he was just a great painter. You look at it and go—of course that pink speck had to be there.

DS: A lot of your paintings seem to start as these vibrating or undulating energy fields that the figures and other forms then attempt to inhabit. Do you think of these fields as physical places? Are they stages for dramas? Do they always exist in your mind first before ending up on paper or canvas?



TC: That is kind of exactly the process, I start with some colors in mind and do nothing but make an environment. That then started getting filled up with creatures or stories. No nothing exists in my mind first. Always the colors.

You get better as you get old at knowing when it is lying to you

DS: People seem so obsessed with backstory and dirt on an artist, that actually just looking at artwork becomes secondary or afterthought. Agree?

TC: I dont know, people see stuff differently, some people look at a hat and see their wife. Who knows what people see. I try to make them beautiful. I try to make them magic. If people encounter them and are so hopelessly limited that they think—oh that is the guy from that one band—that just makes me depressed. But I suppose that is what happens. Thanks Dmitry, now I am going back to bed.

DS: Re “hearing a click” You said this about how you knew when a painting was finished. Is it always that clear a signal? Or are there times when you just don't know, put it away, and realize later that that's all there is to say?

TC: I lied when I said that, sometimes they never go click. Sometimes they do and that is so nice. But you know, you can wreck them. You can go too far and not undo it. I usually have several that are out, that I am working on. Some have stayed out for more than a year and a half —just waiting for that thing to visit me and tell me what to do.

(re mistakes in paintings) Has nothing to do with realism. I can add a red blob in the corner and it can be the perfect thing or ruin the painting.

(re choosing medium) I am in this awful situation as you know. I wish I was working on oils right now but I cannot. But always in this life, I try to take what I am given and make the best of it. I am working on watercolors now and I am finding it rewarding. I have a million ideas for oil paintings, books, TV shows, radio shows, music, but right now I am working in watercolor.

DS: I was more asking about mistakes as inspiration, I guess. But in order for that blob in the corner to be considered a mistake, it means you somehow know how it's SUPPOSED to be, right?

TC: Oh, I make a ton of mistakes that turn into something good. If you do this a while, you know how something is going to look in advance. And it is a bit like a good chess player, you know several moves in advance. if you had that light green there, then a particular blue, then the yellow will look good on top of that.

But lets just say it is you getting dressed—you decide to wear your striped pants. Then if you decide you want to wear your plaid shirt today, you might not know until you look in the mirror that it was a mistake. Unless of course you are a Hipster.



—Come by the studio!

Orso's Honeypot sits on a busy stretch of Robey Ave. There used to be artists in boarded-up storefronts around here, but Orso's the last man standing. There's a whiskey bar/farm-to-table bistro to the left and an artisanal eyeglass emporium to the right. Orso's work table faces the street so he can ogle the young mothers in yoga pants who've overrun the neighborhood. Truth is he doesn't make much art here anymore. In fact, he doesn't personally make much of anything. He has a crew of young acolytes to take care of the grunt work.

A visitor to the Honeypot couldn't be blamed for thinking Orso a real art machine. Dick Blick can keep the doors open on all the supplies he's sold to Orso. But stay an hour or two and you see that the Arches paper, Old Holland paint, rare sable brushes, and fine Belgian linen canvases—stretched in every size—are only stage props. When not regaling admirers with wild war stories, Orso whiles away his work days scrolling through Facebook, Pornhub, and Instagram. Sucking every last fractal of ego boost the algorithms will dole out.

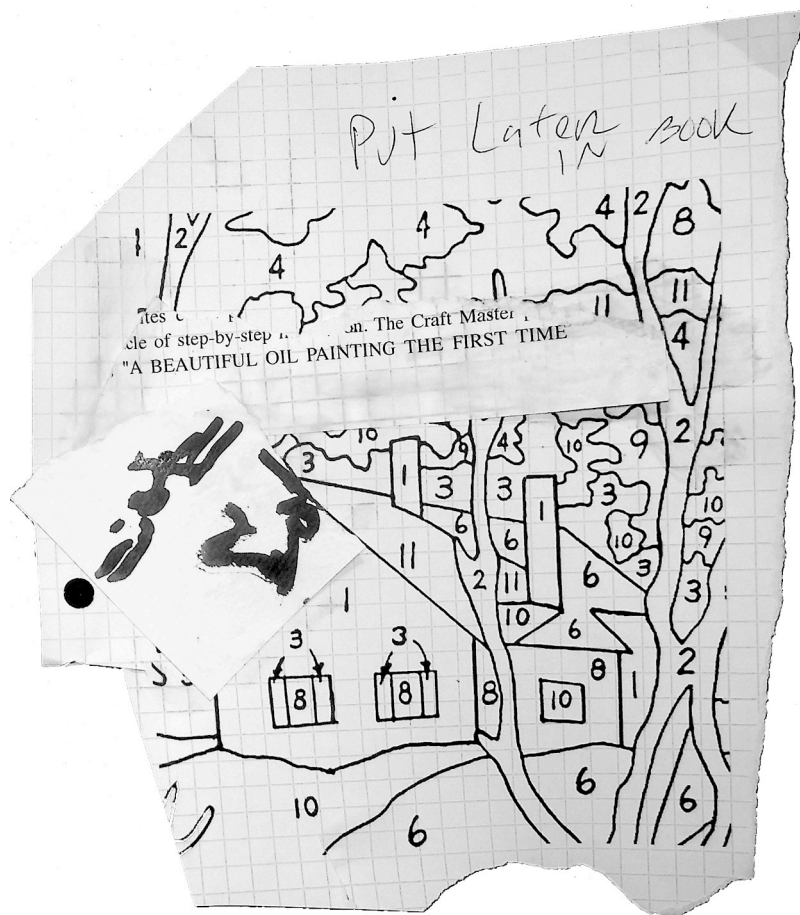
Beyond the “studio” part of his storefront is a gallery. Orso has decided he will now promote the work of others, having himself attained heights of artistic accomplishment accessible to a rare few. He will mentor the younger generation and shine his mighty light on forgotten and neglected masters of the past.

The current show is devoted to Rose Lee-Flecks. Three other galleries have devoted exhibits to the grim snapshots of the infamous recently-deceased washer woman, but Orso insists he's got the inside track on the real gold from the trove auctioned from her unpaid attic crawlspace dwelling. He's got the stuff stashed in bank vaults and hotel safes about town. When an unknown artist is “discovered,” the vultures descend, then flap their mighty wings away with choice morsels vice-gripped in their beaks, furtively making their way to hidden aeries. They hunch together with fellow scavengers, carefully revealing a few details, obscuring others, in desperate, ever-shifting calculations to maximize return on their score.

Lee-Flecks's is a sad story. But not to Orso and his ilk. Because they project their wish fulfillments on her and her work. They scrub clean the illness, sweep it under the rug. All they want the public to see is the raw genius. The wall labels with absurd price tags prove it. They want the buyer to feel she's getting a fleeting miraculous thing. What's a few grand for a glimmer of immortality?

One time, Orso paid me \$20 an hour to move a bunch of framed prints from one undisclosed location to another. He supervised by chain-smoking Marlboro Lights, leaning on the rented Hertz truck and casting weary glances at passersby. He confided that he'd met Rose once or twice when he was coming up.

—Ugly broad. Rude. Unpleasant. But, boy, it's like printing money with those snaps of hers now...



About the time Jackson Pollock was breaking the ice by dripping and dribbling skeins of house paint over cotton-duck tarpaulin on the floor of some barn on Long Island, millions of suburbanites could produce their very own masterpieces in minutes thanks to the miracle of step-by-step instruction. The Craft Master paint kit box tops proclaimed, "A BEAUTIFUL OIL PAINTING THE FIRST TIME YOU TRY." Craft Master—of Detroit, Michigan and later, some place in Ohio—popularized paint-by-numbers in the early 50s.

Per the Paint By Number Museum: "Who is the most exhibited artist in the world? The work of paint by number designer Dan Robbins has been displayed on more walls than that of any other artist. This was true in the past, is still true today and is most likely a record that will stand in the future."

As the New York Times notes: "In appealing to adults, they are marketed as ways to relax and shut down the brain."

A few years earlier, Jon Gnagy broke a different sort of ice by going on TV and convincing viewers that that *they* were the artist. Every week he showed them how. He flamed out after a while, but others picked up his set of magic brushes and added their own accessories to make untold fortunes. All guys like Carey and Orso do is follow a well-trod path. Everyone who's ever gotten into the art racket has quickly come up against the sobering fact that laboring away in some dingy garret for decades in the hopes of being discovered is a dream left only for the most romantic of fools.

Every new media innovation has pushed painting further and further up into the dusty attic. The only way to cut through the noise is to find the newest loudest megaphone and screech away as long as your lungs hold out.

Every man a Rembrandt, the ad copy promises, and why would it lie?

I want to explain. I've never written a thing like this before, so I'm still feeling my way through. It all happened, just like in the other books, but I'm taking more liberties. I already said why I've changed names. In case you forgot, it's because I don't want to get sued. Also, no interest in getting into pissing contests with people with even bigger egos than my own. I'm not writing this book to get even with them. True, they treated me like dogshit, but others had it much worse.

I want to say something about art and commerce, about fame and failure. I'm using episodes from my life and the lives of people I know to do so. Inevitably, feelings will be hurt and my intent will be questioned. That's the price of playing the game of art. I'm okay with that. What I want to assure you of in this, perhaps unnecessary, break from the action, is that it took me many years to conclude that I could say something true without sticking to the facts. I'm using fictional tropes because I'm convinced they will get at what I'm trying to say better than if I tried to chart out a painful tell-all, with fact-checkers and lawyers poring over every sentence. This is not an exposé or muckraker's screed. I also have no interest in holding myself above or apart from the monsters I describe. I'm one of them. A willing participant. Likely worse than most of the others. Because in sober moments—often the middle of sleepless nights—I know there are better ways to be. More noble paths to follow. Orso and Carey are oblivious, or such accomplished liars that they're convinced of their own righteousness. I have neither excuse to fall back on.

I'm just a bitter wannabe.



Win Cloud changed my life without even quickening his breath. When I was sixteen, my father signed me up for a figure drawing class. It met Wednesday evenings on one of the upper floors of the student union on the campus of the university where my father worked. Every other student taught or went to school there, making me by far the youngest.

I don't know how many unclothed women I'd seen in my life in person up until this class, but it wouldn't be an impressive number. What I knew best about the female form came from looking at paintings and drawings. My parents dragged me to museums all my life. I hated it but something of the reckoning with bodies on a flat surface stuck. I've made my own sorry attempts ever since I can remember.

There were some art teachers before Win but few would have a bigger impact. Especially considering how little he taught outwardly. His method was near-silent osmosis. He'd saunter around the room now and then, offering occasional advice or correction, but for most of the two-hour duration, he was at his own easel, making muscular, effortless-seeming, rhythmic gesture drawings. Sometimes he'd add a wash to accentuate the direction of the light or a fold of flesh. He drew with his whole arm, the rest of his body bending along gracefully to the mark created by the stub of charcoal held loose in his hand. It was like Tai Chi but with a visible record of each motion. The naked woman on the stand in the middle of the room was a pretext for this series of body movements. The rest of us were like uncoordinated bumbler by comparison. But you wouldn't know it by how Win treated us.

He made everyone in that room feel like a colleague, a fellow student of a subject that could never be truly mastered. Because art for the artist is a way of being

rather than a means to an end or a series of technical tricks to overcome. What Win communicated without a word was the engulfing flow of engaging with the world by making marks in reaction to what it threw at you.

From the first hour in that room, I sensed I'd be doing what I did there for the rest of my life. And it turned out to be so.

One time, a couple years back, sitting in a booth at the Albatross, Carey told me about a beautiful woman he was with when he was young. She was wild and free and almost as beautiful as he thought *he* was back then. She got him hooked on smack and her father hated his guts. Her name was Nika Cloud. It took me some time to put it together and I never told Carey about the connection. I didn't want him talking shit about a guy that mattered to me. Also, it felt good to know something he didn't. Because he knew everything. All you had to do was ask.

Win never talked about his family. I didn't even know about the aikido thing, but when Carey said it, it clicked everything into place. The way the man moved was right out of those old martial arts movies. He'd glide, seeming to barely touch the linoleum beneath his black slippers. Carey went on and on about how perfect Win's daughter's ass was. He had a talent for making anything beautiful ugly. He blamed her for making him a junkie and said she stepped out on him with every other swinging dick in the scene. As he was going on and on, I wondered what Win would be like as a father. Did he live with Nika's mother? Was he in his daughter's life at all?

I went on Instagram and found her. Thirty years after the time Carey knew her, she was still stunning. In her timeline were pictures of farmer's markets, flowers, and a couple children bearing her unmistakable genetic trace. Way down the scroll, Nika posted several of her father's paintings. Then a post announcing his passing.

After the class, I didn't keep in touch with Win. I didn't know yet that was a thing you could do. That some of

your teachers would be happy to become your friends. I don't know if Win would have wanted that, but seeing him smiling in cropped Instagram snapshots made me regret not trying.

The drawings I made in his class got me into art school. I still catch a life-drawing session when I can find one. It's like going back to the rudiments, the source. Win showed me how to lay the foundation for everything I made after. Without those easy charcoal marks, I couldn't have made a thing worth a second look.

Maybe if Carey had taken Win's class he wouldn't be such an asshole. Probably not though.

At the very least, he might have learned how to draw.



Albert York never wanted his own TV show. There's not more than one or two photographs of him so far as I know. He lived somewhere on Long Island. He painted enigmatic little pictures of horsemen, flowers, cows, and clumps of trees. There was a waiting list years long for every canvas he touched a brush to. He worked at his own pace. Even his dealer couldn't prod him to quicken it. He wasn't even allowed to know York's address.

Every five or ten years a crate arrived at the gallery holding twenty new pictures. The payment—agreed to in advance—was paid to an old lawyer in Montauk. No matter what the gallerist tried to bribe him with, York's address could not be pried out of him. All anyone could do was wait patiently for the next shipment.

When the gallerist organized a retrospective, York didn't show up, but let it be known through his lawyer that after seeing the exhibit, was pretty upset about what he'd been doing for these last years. Meaning that, seeing his own work was a disappointment to him. Whatever standard he strived for, he'd fallen short of, at least in his own mind. It was a rare, perhaps *only*, insight into the man's psyche.

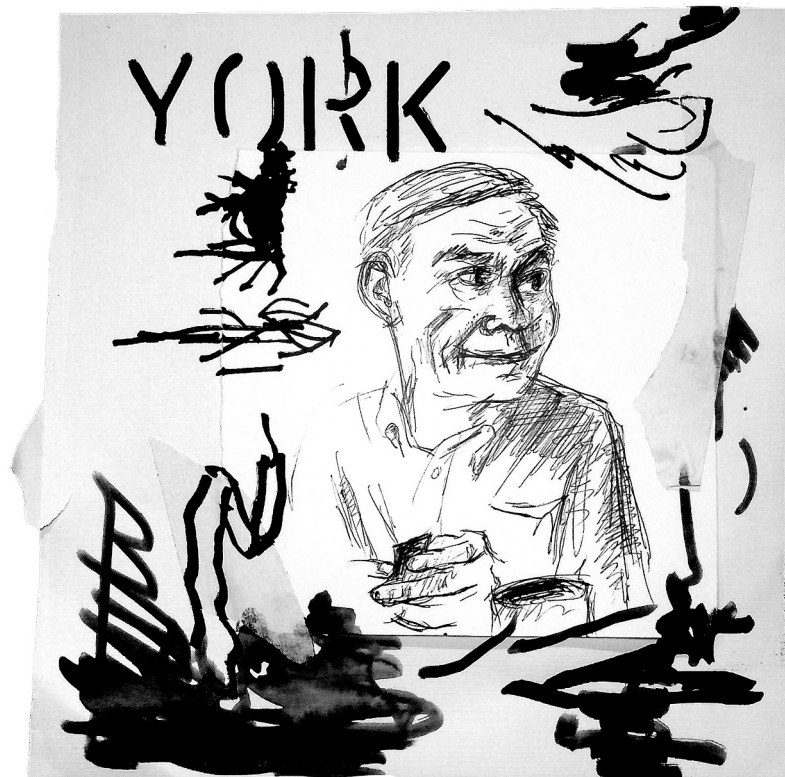
Many years followed with no more packages. Then the lawyer sent word that York had passed. The gallerist was not permitted to see any unfinished pictures, nor visit the studio where York worked. The high prices his pictures commanded now shot to the moon. The best move any artist can make for his career is to die. Everybody knows that.

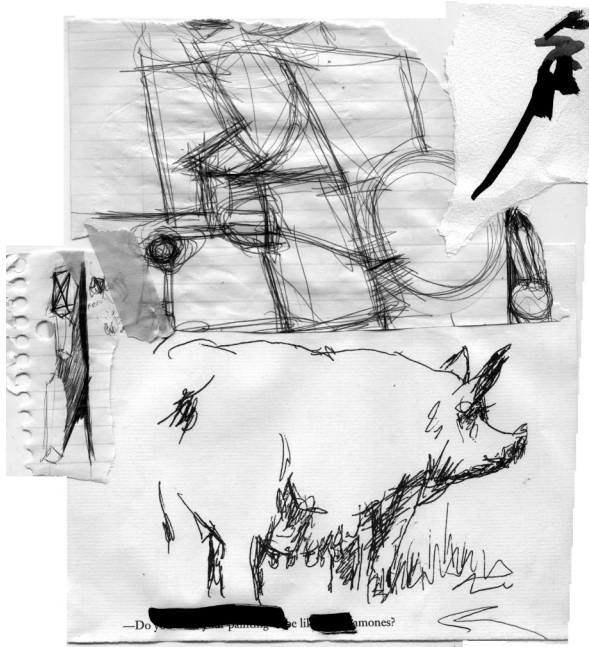
Albert York was my model for what a painter should do. How did it go so wrong? Why am I palling around with blowhards who never see past the tips of their noses or their guts? Neither Orso or Carey could bear to make a move without guarantee of an adoring audience. They were custom made for our solipsistic age. They both think York was a loser weirdo. I know because I asked them.

If they had to choose, they'd pick fame. They act

out the artist's life but don't live it. Maybe York had enough money not to care about what anyone thought. But these guys have plenty of money and still care about every like and retweet. What matters most to them is the reaction. And the louder the better.

I don't want to live that way. But how to get by without constantly jumping up and down and pointing at myself to just pay the bills?





—Do you want your painting to be like the Ramones?

He asks expecting me to say *no*. I do but don't say it. There's a roomful of scared kids gathered around a nude model, trying their best to make a painting he won't hate. He's known to make students cry. It's not CBGB's, so we're supposed to aim for what, Orchestra Hall? The Civic Opera House? I hate all that shit. Still not over my years with the violin. Fuck yeah I wanna be the Ramones!?!

Painting peaked at least a hundred years before I was born. Why does it draw me? I should've been into video or some computer shit, should've gotten with the times. Not

the thing done best by Velázquez, Rembrandt, Breughel. It's stupid. Like setting yourself up for certain failure and misery. What was my pie-in-the sky dream when I picked up those cursed brushes? At the time, the top of the heap was a guy who drew with his elbow over a pile of broken crockery. A teacher said a painting I made was like trying to play a concerto with a chainsaw. Was he trying to encourage me or telling me to quit?

I was trying to make pictures out of what was in front of me: my girlfriend, the living room, the view out the window on Logan Boulevard, my fat face in the mirror. In school—aside from figure-painting class—what I was doing was considered exercise, calisthenics, like going to the gym. They kept telling me my pictures were all technique. When would they be *about* something? The star genius students all started with meanings and ideas, then set about finding marks to render the concept. I always thought I'd find it by doing. The meaning, I mean.

Orso had his first Honeypot down the street from the Art Institute then. But I didn't go there. It wasn't my scene. I don't know what I thought went on there but was sure it wasn't for me. At nineteen and twenty we know it all. After that you spend the rest of your life learning how little you know. At least that's been my experience.

My classmate, Brian, walked around with a paperback copy of *Post Office* permanently wedged in the back pocket of his ripped up old jeans. He probably hung out at the Honeypot. He bought a bloody pig's head in Chinatown and hauled it on the Red Line back to school. Plopping it on a long work table in one of the classrooms, bits of butcher paper still stuck to it here and there, he painted its portrait over and over, like it was a beloved member of his own family.

I figured he'd make a splash in the art world, but he disappeared before graduation never to be heard from again. Wonder what happened to all his pig portraits? He could've become Orso's buddy. A kindred spirit. They could've debated bears versus pigs till the cows came home.



I had a friend when I was little who was good at everything. He was the starting pitcher, the point guard, the anchor on the relay. He singsonged the entirety of “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash all the way home from school. I was annoyed but jealous.

We were friends many years. He had many other friends, girlfriends, hobbies, but he was my only friend. Others asked him why he tolerated me. I asked him too sometimes.

He dropped out of school and moved in with a coke dealer. Lost thirty pounds in two months. I visited him at the latenight convenience store where he worked. We’d flip through the magazines behind the counter but for him it was just a way to pass the time. He wasn’t into tits, legs, or asses.

One time at his house I saw a magazine I’d never heard of before. Page after page of fully-clothed women tied to chairs with thick ropes in elaborate knots. I thought it was a joke but this is what my friend got off on. This was when I knew I didn’t know him.

We drifted apart. I went to art school while he fronted bands and lived in group houses with blacked-out windows so no one could see inside. Bongs and pizza boxes covered any flat surface. Walls yellowed with the patina of resin and tobacco residue. They watched cartoons all day while getting high.

Him and his roommates were always going on and on about the phantom forces conspiring against them. Keeping them from living the way they deserved to. They’d fixate on failed political and philosophical systems that, were they enacted, the theory went, would fix all the problems we were suffering from. Not a single one of these solutions involved getting up from the couch or turning off the Cartoon Network.

I moved away and we lost touch. There was an occasional call or letter, but most of the time I didn't even know what couch he was crashing on. He had a knack for ingratiating himself to women who would feed him and pay for his drugs for years at a stretch. No bills were ever in his name. He never kept a job long and always insisted on being paid in cash. Bank accounts and taxes were just ways for the Man to keep him down.

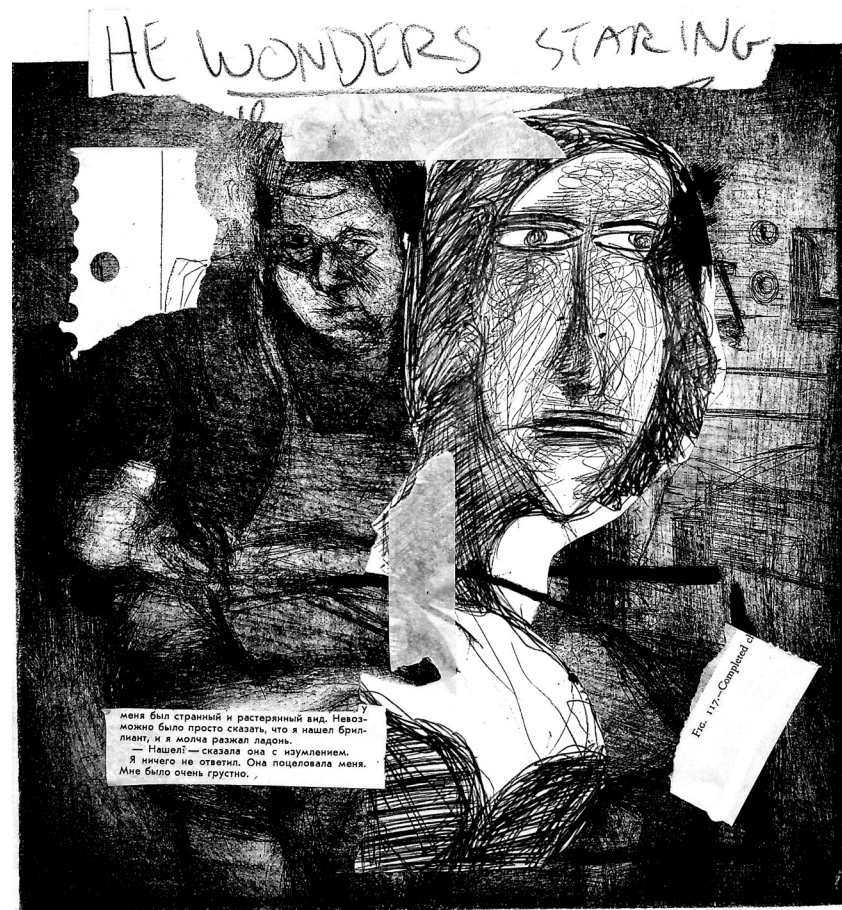
Years pass. I track him down to another one of those sad group houses. This one's in Portland, Oregon, three thousand miles from where we grew up but it may as well be around the corner from all the other ones just like this one. He's holed up with a raggedy girl half his age. He's pushing fifty now so his act isn't so cute anymore. They don't seem like they get along so well. It will be time to find a new one soon.

We go for a walk and I tell him about Orso and Carey, about writing a book, about the art shows I've had. He doesn't pretend to be impressed or happy for me. Says I've always been ambitious. Makes it sound like an insult. Like, that's fine for me but not what true artists want or need. His aspirations are unattainable in this corrupt society that's bent on keeping him down.

We get back to his sad house and he turns on *Ren & Stimpy* and blazes up. I leave without saying goodbye.

How can I see my own features in the mirror with Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Schiele, Soutine, Beckmann, Freud, Neel and the rest blocking my view. Fucking impossible. Why bother? There's no way to probe the depths of your psyche with all these others in the way. Do I even care about these so-called depths? What if all there is to see is right here on the surface? If so, this is not the face I want to devote hours or even minutes to examining. There's so much to look at in the world and only so much time to do so. Why waste any of it on a reversed, often optically distorted version of my own physiognomy? City streets, living rooms, bookshelves, others' faces and bodies, even the products of what passes for my imagination should all come first.

Is there anyone who would even want to look at a portrait of me? Parents, friends, significant others? They are sort of coerced into being interested in a thing like that by default. Part of the price they pay for being related or involved. So their judgement and taste can't necessarily be trusted.



I'm working at Pearl Art & Craft. On a break from stashing brushes and paints in overstock to smuggle out and sell to old art school professors at twenty-five cents on the dollar, I take a look at the community board by the entrance and see a flier asking for someone to stretch and prime canvases at \$100 per. That leads me to a posh old rabbit warren of artist studios in Lincoln Park. The woman who hires me is very nice. The walls of her space are covered with canvas after canvas with nothing but the word 'LOVE' scrawled all over in varying styles of penmanship and typeface, punctuated by heart shapes. Not the proportions of an actual heart but the one you'd trace in the air trying to be sweet to your girlfriend. She could make emoji rather than waste canvases and paint, I'm thinking. But I don't say that.

The woman's stockbroker boyfriend has paid the rent on the studio a couple years in advance with cash. Now she's hurrying to finish her last few pieces for her upcoming show at something called the Wretched Gallery. I'd never heard of it. I'm not up on the gallery scene. After I stretch five six-footers for her, she hands me an envelope with some crisp c-notes and asks whether I'd help get her work over to the gallery the following week.

This is when I meet Edith. After emptying the U-Haul full of 'LOVE', we get to talking. I show her my sketchbook, then she comes by my place a few days later. Soon we're planning a show.

The Wretched Gallery—not its actual name, but close enough that a couple people might know the place I'm talking about—sits a couple doors down from an old movie palace. A succession of fashion boutiques and tchotchke emporia have opened and closed on the block. Each represents a little dream that burns bright and fast and goes out even faster after the initial enthusiasm of novelty fades. The slog of day-in day-out commerce is never visible when plans are made. There's an image in the mind of a magical gathering place that will also somehow pay the bills.

Fortunately, this is not Edith's first rodeo. She's been running an allegedly-successful antiques shop/art gallery in a small Lake Michigan town where Chicago's rich and bored occasionally summer. I've never been there. Not invited. She acts like she knows what she's doing.

My pictures are all about the place I live. An unkempt apartment with roommates in a gentrifying part of the city. There are mornings when car owners on my block wake to driver's side windows smashed out but nothing except loose change and CDs missing. Still, property values are rising and longtime home owners are optimistic they'll be able to cash out and retire soon. My roommates and I know we'll be priced out any day, so we appreciate the roomy squalor as best we can.

The paintings and drawings range from ten inches square up to five or six feet wide. When I arrive at Wretched for the install, Edith's new assistant meets me. Edith is back in her resort town headquarters tending to some high-ticket business. He's an older gent with a haughty manner that rubs me all kinds of wrong. We butt heads throughout the hang. After a time, whatever one of us says is contradicted by the other out of spite. The biggest disagreement is over pricing.

The thing with pricing art is it's whatever you can get in the moment. A shrewd dealer gauges their mark and gambles on how much to lighten their wallet. The true price of art is right between priceless and worthless. It's an ever-moving target. What's the cost of something nobody needs but you can't live without?

My new enemy doesn't see it this way. He insists on pricing the pictures according to size. I ask whether he thinks a Persian miniature should cost less than an art school beginner's colossal monstrosity. He refuses to concede the point. In the end, I get him to admit through gritted teeth, that the gallery policy is to price by the yard. Like wallpaper.

A couple weeks before the opening, Edith calls to tell me to come by to pick up show cards. She's picked a shitty slide and had it reproduced in reverse, colors

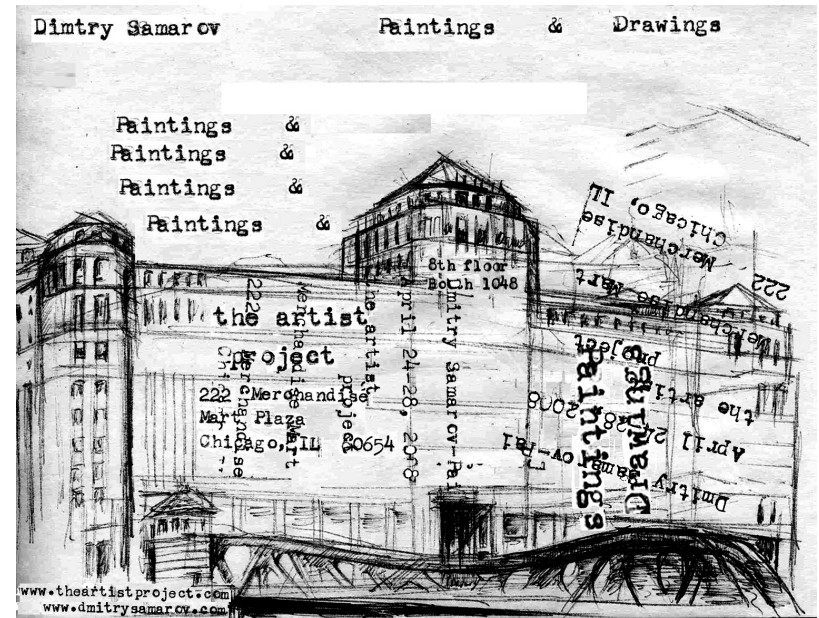
completely distorted, image out of focus, part of the black sheet against which the photographer had shot the picture still visible. I want to ask whether this is her asshole assistant's revenge, but don't.

The opening comes and I drink all afternoon to get ready. All my Pearl coworkers show up. I pull a sport coat out of the back of the closet. Half the pieces sell. It should feel like a success. Edith seems pleased.

The following year she shutter the gallery. Tells me she can't run two places and the Chicago one doesn't even cover the storefront rent with monthly sales. I guess they need to sell many more reams of wallpaper than they managed to. I bet the old guy is heartbroken.

I look into the empty storefront for years after when passing by to see a movie. Nothing that opens there ever lasts more than a year or two. Maybe Edith or her henchman has cursed it by their presence. Last I hear from her is when I ask for a record of what collectors bought my pieces from my one show with her. She writes back regretfully that she'd kept no records during that time.

It's as if my show never happened.





THROUGH.
WISPS, WOOSHING
ILLUSORY WAVES.

The Liver Spot sits in the middle of a nondescript block of Belmont Avenue. The Point Diner and the Chicago Dispatcher used to be in the next building over. But that building was demolished several years ago. The Blue Light is still around the corner but I don't recognize it. It's for yuppies now. Or preppies or normies or whatever. I don't know. I haven't set foot inside in twenty years. The Liver Spot isn't what it used to be either.

Back when Carey would show up for unscheduled sets—acting like he was the Stones playing the Double Door—to an audience of five or six blasé whiskey drinkers who'd never heard of him, the Liver was decorated with mismatched furniture and horrible thrift-store art. It was like a cabaret in a junkyard. The bartender never knew my name and I loved him for that.

It's austere, minimal now. The old owner sold when he saw the neighborhood changing. The new guy thinks it's Jazz at Lincoln Center. It's a "listening room" now. The seats have sleek lines and are profoundly uncomfortable for anyone weighing over 140 pounds. It's no longer a place to linger. The good whiskey at rotgut prices is but a sniff of a memory. So it goes.

Carey now announces his appearance on Twitter, Snapchat, and IG Live. He can't blow his horn, but he'll spin you a yarn if you let him. He'll do it even if you ask him not to. He doesn't listen too good. He has an insatiable need to tell anyone within earshot about what once was. Who he used to be. Who he'll soon be again.

The new guy's thinking of dropping the *Liver* part of the name, sacrilege to old-timers like me. We'd ask each other,

—Gonna be at the Liver later?

Knowing full well the answer's always *yes*, even when we say *no*. The new guy doesn't want any seedy associations for his jazz temple. He puts up with a few of us still coming around out of charity or compromise or goodwill. But there's no love lost and no one who looks like me will attract the crowd he's after. Carey's a legend so he gets *carte blanche*, whereas I'm a nobody, so tolerating my presence holds little benefit.

The bartender—the twenty-two-year-old son of the singer of a popular band I hate—has Stereolab on low. Carey's holding court tonight. Telling us about the last time he was on Carson or Conan, some late-night show. He describes in vivid, wrenching detail how he fought to stay upright on the bandstand. The sickness coursing through him. Sending lightning shocks that blinded him every few seconds. When he *could* see, it wasn't the clapping studio audience or the host pretending to love him, but vibrating electric-tinted worms in dayglo rainforests. He kept blowing the standard the censors approved before he hit the stage, but it was practically out-of-body. He'd played the number so many times he barely had to be there. He has his other four listeners on the edge of their seats. Out-of-towners. They're at the Liver tonight after reading up about it in an airline magazine. They hoped to run into an authentic jazzbo. It's their lucky night. What they don't know is that Carey tells his harrowing tale word for word in bars and coffeeshops all over town night after night. I don't tell them. I don't want to burst the old blowhard's balloon.

When he's done talking, he signs the records they brought, works up what passes for a smile for their selfies. He's exhausted. I finish the last of my drink and help him out to the car. He stopped driving long before the sickness. The last time he was behind the wheel he drove into someone's living room. He's been paying others to cart him about ever since. He likes it. Makes him feel important. I have a rolling deal with the Liver Spot guy to bring Carey over in exchange for a break on my bar tab. Maybe that's why he tolerates my presence. If I can get the horn player here a

time or two a week, it ups the bar's cred, even if the tourists hardly ever order more than a glass of his box wine or a light beer.



Orso slaps a c-note on the bar. Orders a cranberry juice/soda and ten bucks in quarters for pinball. Tells me to keep twenty, gathers up the coins and glass, waddles over to the machine. He can't stay out of the bars

He famously no longer drinks. I never sat in on meetings of the secret society but have heard he holds forth at length to a rapt captive audience week in, week out. He's one of those guys addicted to recovery. He can't stop recovering. Especially because he gets so much attention detailing his many many flaws and indiscretions. Great place to pick up women too.

I bring over a refill now and then as he bangs away at the flippers. He tells me about the hot number he chatted up in the church basement the night before. Hearing Orso talk about women will put you off women. But that mountain of a man has no trouble getting what and who he wants. I hate that he does and envy him at the same time. I've never talked a woman into anything but walking away.

I picture them melting as he details a bar brawl started because some guy looked at him the wrong way. Or his wife having to throw away another set of soiled sheets after he came home blacked out unable to control his bladder. Is it a mothering thing? Do they think they can fix him? Why would they want to?

I watch the fat fuck thrust and shimmy making the machine light up and wonder what his secret is. Does he actually believe his own bullshit? Is that why others do? He still seems miserable. But maybe that's an act he puts on for my benefit. Sociopaths have a knack for mirroring their quarry's affect and needs. He acts the way he thinks I want him to in order to get whatever he wants from me. I'm just guessing. His game is on a level I have no access to. Don't know the rules or even how to begin.

He's done abusing the machine for now. He nods my way and moves his mass toward the door. He catches his reflection in the glass and stops to adjust the porkpie so it's tilted just so, then pushes his way out.

Korb rearranges the chairs at 4pm every Monday. He makes them all face the little makeshift stage in the back of the Albatross. It's hours until anyone will show up to listen to his free jazz combo try the regulars' patience by alternating squalls of piercing atonal brass notes with barely audible string noodling. But Korb measures the gaps between seats as if he's at the Village Vanguard before Coltrane hits the stage.

I give the guy credit. His monastic devotion to a narrow definition of pure musical expression is sort of admirable, if a bit creepy. He's a little white suburban kid who worships at an altar built of the frustration and struggle of the descendants of former slaves. What can Korb possibly contribute that doesn't smack of imitation or outright thievery? Yet, it's mostly guys like Korb, fanatical followers with little primal connection, who keep this stuff alive.

Mondays are slow at the bar, so when Korb asks Lon about hosting a music night it seems pretty low risk. The place is empty anyway. Why not let the kid invite his friends to play their weird music? Few of them drink much. They duck their heads into their coats to vape in between sips of dollar Old Style. But maybe if there are more of them it could be worthwhile.

The first night, Korb's band clears the room in ten minutes. Even Bill, who will linger if there's anyone at all in the bar to talk at, sprints out the door. I lean my elbows on the bar and give in to the pain the three guys onstage are inflicting on their instruments. The nearest chairs are occupied by their significant others. Tough to say whether they're enjoying the sounds their mates produce. Pleasure isn't the point. This is art. It's supposed to be difficult, incomprehensible, unpleasant.

Korb hunches over his saxophone directing all the force he can summon through it, producing a tone that makes me imagine a particularly painful alien birth. His

drummer scrapes and stabs at his kit with objects salvaged from the alley out back. The bassist mostly air guitars his upright's strings while freeze-framing in various dramatic poses.

Afterwards, Korb passes his Kangol cap around for donations. Lon has given him an open tab for the night plus \$50, so this feels wrong. Besides, does he expect his girlfriend to pay for listening? Should probably be the other way around. But guys like him never know that. He believes his audience, whoever it's made up of, is given great privilege by witnessing him do his thing. He's doing important work.

He sure as hell won't get a dime out of me.

Since no one is ordering drinks, I sketch them playing. After a few weeks of Mondays I fill up half a book. There are now about a dozen faithful listeners and Korb's combo isn't the only one that performs. Carey shows up once, but doesn't sit in, though Korb begs him to. The regulars know to clear out at 7pm sharp.

Things come to a head the night Korb loses it on a birthday party.

Three middle-aged women and their husbands are crowded in the booth furthest from the stage. They come in right after I open. They've brought a birthday cake, candles, paper plates. They order shots of Jäger before sitting down. They put candles in the cake, light them, and sing happy birthday. The birthday girl, dressed in a blouse for a much younger person, blows them out with such force that she almost lands on the floor from the recoil.

They cut up the cake and bring me and the drinkers at the bar slices. Then a round of Old Style and more Jäger. They're getting a little loud but not bothering anybody, so I let them be.

Korb walks in carrying his horn. He nods my way, puts his things down near the stage and starts to move chairs. He gives the party a dirty look now and then. It's not even 5pm. The band starts at 7.

All the chairs now point toward the stage. Each table and place at the bar has a flier with Korb's music

schedule for the next three months. He lights tea candles and distributes them about the room. He skips the party, but they don't notice. They're scream-laughing as he passes them.

As 7pm approaches all the regulars clear out. A dozen young people in carefully chosen thrift-store garb cluster near the stage in the back. A few are talking to Korb and his bandmates. Some scribble intently in tiny notebooks, the rest stare into space. None are drinking.

The birthday party near the door is still raging even though I've cut them off. The last three times any of them come up to order Jäger I offer pint glasses of water instead. They'll leave eventually. But not soon enough for Korb.

After setting up the instruments and passing over the Kangol around the crowd preemptively, he marches over to the party and tells them to be quiet. He's not yelling but his tone isn't friendly. They stop for a second, look up at him in unison, then burst into laughter. Korb skulks back to the stage and proceeds to lead his combo in a paint-peeling half hour of improvised noise. The birthday party departs at about the mid-way point, as they're unable to hear one another even when they scream. I fill up a couple sketchbook pages, then go pick up the dozen empty shot glasses, piles of paper plates, and crumpled napkins and wrapping paper.

Lon comes down just as Korb is packing up his sax. He gives him the customary \$50 but says this is the last time. He tells me later somebody from the party, a former schoolmate, it turns out, called and complained. After everyone else is gone, Korb sits slumped over his Old Style and complains that he's been mistreated. That nobody understands his art. I pause a moment or two for sympathy, then go back to washing glasses.

Korb comes in sometimes but he leaves the chairs where they are. The regulars have started to stay past 7pm again.

When someone asks about live music at the Albatross I tell them about Korb.



— Original Message —

From: Carey <carey@uglyandstrange.com>
Tue, 3:22 PM
To: dmitrysamarov@gmail.com

I hope i got these from the right folder - there are several depending on who they were being sent to - there may be notes to - the police or XXXXX or who knows - i didnt send them to you before because they have been interpreted in so many ways but one thing is certain - at least 5 shrinks have looked at this and said he was abused as a child, either sexually or psychologically - he turned you into his father and when you didnt reward him for his efforts he turned all of his self loathing and hatred of his father onto you almost all of them have said the exact same thing

From: Carey <carey@uglyandstrange.com>
To: Steven Stalker
<steven@ihatemydad.com>

Sent: Monday, November 10,
3:31:41 AM

Subject: ..

I am so sorry this happened

I dont know what to say

From: Steven Stalker
<steven@ihatemydad.com> on Nov 10th at
2:31 pm

Me too, Tim.

I should have explained that we only had the one night to shoot.

I could have suggested you bring food.

I could have asked Harry to make his bedroom available for you in case your body went bad.

I know that, had you known we only had the one night, you would had not even considered making plans for later.

Thank you for doing your best.

I know in my heart of hearts you did.

I'm just glad you're ok.

Please forgive me for not taking you home that night, and for

anything callous, or foolish I said in
raised tones yesterday.

From: Carey <carey@uglyandstrange.com>
on Nov 11th at 3:27 am

Is there a way to salvage this?

*Note , Around this time he began
calling me repeatedly , letting the
phone ring twice and hanging up.

From: Steven Stalker
<steven@ihatemydad.com> on Nov 12, at
2:42 am

I think perhaps its better we
just leave each other alone.

We both think we've tried our
best in this relationship, yet we both
continue to hurt each other.

The feeling of failure has left
me empty.

I can't handle any more
criticism.

I stood on the railing of the
XXXXXX bridge on my walk home the other
night.

if not for leaving J- in the
lurch for the money he lent me and the
thought my cat would starve, I would
have gone for a swim.

Our best is not good enough for
each other.

From: Carey <carey@uglyandstrange.com>
on Nov 12, 7:43 pm

I know you had an incredible
amount on the line. So I understand.

It makes me feel horrible that I
couldn't continue. And I know it is
impossible for anyone to understand
that.

But I felt like you questioned my
heart. I have a lot of heart.

From: Steven Stalker
<steven@ihatemydad.com> on Nov 24th,
5:10 am

It seems pretty clear we both see
our relationship as unbalanced.

Shall we agree to leave each
other alone altogether?

From: Steven Stalker
<steven@ihatemydad.com> on Nov 24th,
5:14 am

I'll assume no response is a yes.

From: Carey <carey@uglyandstrange.com>
on Nov 25, 7:43 pm

i suffered agony for you - it was
met with disappointment and derision

I don't remember anyone suffering
agony for me

I dont want to hear from you any
more

From: Steven Stalker
<steven@ihatemydad.com> on Nov 26th,
3:14 am

finally, the truth.

Scumbag,

One day you'll be gone, and this
earth will be delivered from the virus
of your existence.

I will not mourn.

Not for one second.

It wont, however, happen with my
help.

You are like the pedophile who
gains the trust of the innocent, only
to inflict upon them the most horrible
abuse possible.

I will not waste one more
precious second of my life being
infected with your misery.

I hope for myself to one day have
the strength to pity you.

If I never see your face, or hear
your foul name again, it will be too
soon.

I sleep in my own bed tonight
praying to never have you enter my
consciousness again.



Carey sends message after message rapid-fire. He was reticent at first. But I gain his trust, so the flood gates have opened. Text exchanges, email, articles, along with his own caustic commentaries come at me all day. It's a little much, but I'm flattered my hero is trusting me with his story.

It started on Twitter. Carey popped up there out of the blue. No one had heard much out of him for many years. Just rumors. That he'd lost his mind. Got cancer. Become a hermit. To me, he was a legend. A genius of music and movies. But, as with most legends, he was basically dead. Not of this world. Certainly not in any way part of my reality as a person. But now, here he is on Twitter. I hit the 'follow' button.

He spends most of his time on the platform making jokes. Occasional political commentary. A lot of attention paid to sports scores. Funny routines, but repetitive. Scroll through the timeline and you'll catch him recycling bits that hit. I can't begrudge him this because to me he's still the guy who wore that hat that way in that one movie.

The paintings are another matter. He says in interviews that the mystery sickness he's battled now for decades has made him unable to pick up his horn. He had to pivot to painting. Claims he's always been a painter. Mentions how his mother encouraged him when he was little. Says his pictures are as profound as his tunes used to be.

I can understand why Carey insists his awful pictures are good. He's saying it out loud to will it to be true. His self-worth is tied to being a great artist so he thinks whatever he lays his hands on must be great simply because he was great once, doing something entirely different.

Look, medium doesn't really matter. You either have something to say or you don't. Whether by brush, horn, camera, or throat, if you have a story to tell you tell with whatever means are available. But just because you're good at one thing, doesn't guarantee you'll be even passable at another. With apologies to the Gagosian Gallery, et al, Bob Dylan is no painter. You sell those things on name-recognition and nothing but. It's very rare for anyone to excel at more than one thing. I'll watch Carey blow his horn all day. I'll watch his old movies and shows for hours on a loop. But, please, for the love of god, put down the brushes, my friend. You're hurting yourself and others.

Of course I don't tell him any of that. Once he starts responding to me on Twitter, I rarely question any of the absurd things he does or says. In a matter of days, he's confiding about the long list of eminent figures who've wronged or abandoned him. He shares his fears about an admirer who he says has been stalking him. Forcing Carey to move out of the city to an undisclosed location. Only his lawyer and a couple assistants know his whereabouts. It's all very cloak-and-dagger. There's a paranoid pall over most of these communications.

But I lap it all up.

onto the world stage now as a painter rather than a musician or filmmaker.

If it was anyone but Carey, I would have poked holes a mile wide in each and every self-serving soliloquy, but he's my hero, so I let him go on and on and on. Before I know it, I'm convincing him I'm the writer to help him rise from the ashes.

Then, somehow, even though he won't offer even an endorsement of Carey's art on the record, Orso becomes part of the piece. I let it slip in a casual chat with my editor that I know the big lug. She's starstruck. Turns out her childhood bedroom is papered with his bears. She offers me the cover and an extra couple pages. I agree, even though I don't know how I can tie these two colossal egos together without a cataclysm of one kind or another.

The trouble with geniuses is that there is only enough space for one's hot air at a time. They can't share and rarely step aside with any grace. You have to trick them by convincing them that standing down is in their best interest. That it will make them come off as the bigger man. In the case of Carey and Orso, I don't even know if they've ever met. I think they follow each other on Instagram. Both have visited me at the bar. But never at the same time. They're aware of one another in a mythological way. Like a rumor that's best not questioned.

Then Orso tells me he's retiring from the art world and I know how he'll fit into my article. It will be a story of one man entering as the other exits. As if Carey's taking Orso's spot atop the local art mountain. But how will I appease two megalomaniacs in one fell swoop?

The tryouts are being held at the vacant old Carson Pirie Scott Building on State Street. They put notices in the *Repeater* and on Facebook and Twitter. All of Orso's young helpers are excited. They daydream about what they'd do with the \$10,000 prize money. How a museum show will launch their careers. Assure them a spot in the history books. One day, some kid will fall asleep during their art history survey lecture as the lucky winner's slide fills the auditorium's gigantic screen.

The big man rolls back in from lunch and as soon as he catches wind of what they're talking about he blows his stack. Bellows about how art isn't sports. That you can't win at art the way you can at football. Tells them in no uncertain terms that if he finds out one of them auditioned, they can pack their bags. Their names will be mud at the Honeypot.

Piece of Work is a reality show from one of the stars of a popular sitcom. The tiny one with the giant head. I didn't know about that until sharing an elevator with her and her children one time at the museum. Something about the lenses in cameras distort human proportions like funhouse mirrors. I noticed a similar effect when I worked at the art supply store. There was a modeling agency next door. Those girls looked like giraffes out in meatspace, away from the glossy pages of *Cosmo* and *Glamour*.

The premise is *Survivor/Bachelorette* in the art world. Ten contestants live in a fancy sprawling apartment—donated by a posh realty, which is one of production's underwriters—and are put through a series of trials and challenges, when not badly performing the conflicts the non-union writer's room cobbles together for them. Each episode prominently features brands that partner with shows like this to right the karmic balance the way warmongers lend their names to hospital wards and opera houses. Synergy abounds.

Orso's upset because he thinks he's got integrity. He takes courageous stands against the sellouts and opportunists. He's built his fame by charting an uncompromising course through the hinterlands of storefront and apartment galleries, en route to the blue chip climes of auction houses and museums. He suffered no fools and stuck up for fellow artists he felt were taken advantage of by gate-keepers.

This is the mantra he pounds into the malleable craniums of each child-helper who darkens the Honeypot's doorstep. Each one of the current crop know his spiel by heart. They recite it in his voice while blowing off steam at the bar. They bitch about how controlling he is, but don't dare to contradict him or call him out for the ways he bullies them. Maybe they see this dumb reality show as a way out of Orso's art sweatshop.

If any of them sneak off and try out, no one hears about it, or maybe, the ones who braved it didn't make it past the preliminary rounds, and thus were not shown on air. I know for a fact the big lug watches the show. I've been to his house and laughed as he yelled at his flatscreen while the contestants competed in "street art," "collage," and "4-D" challenges. It's ludicrous but we can't look away. The art racket isn't portrayed much on TV because it's a relic of a different century. For the most part, it's now the domain of outcasts and money launderers. Not the typical reality show fare. So anyone who's ever carried a sketchbook around will tune in because few can resist watching a version of themselves on screen. If there was a CPA challenge show, every accountant worldwide would watch.

Orso makes me swear I won't let any of the kids know. Is he just mad because he wasn't chosen as one of the judge/experts? Remember, this is the guy who measures the walls of any museum he enters to imagine how his pieces would look there.

He wants to wager on who will win. His money's on the Native former lumberjack who chainsaws wildlife sculpture from dead tree trunks uprooted after a gas pipeline

was cut through his family's ancestral land. He cheers when his guy fails to comprehend an effete critic's artspeak objections to his latest creation. Orso nearly jumps up from his La-Z-Boy, before thinking better of it. He wants the lumberjack to give the critic a swirl. This from the man who had his *Art Forum* review blown up and prominently displayed in a gilded frame in his living room.

When his lumberjack loses out to a near-mute Goth girl who painstakingly reenacts scenes from her childhood via videos shot on an outmoded camcorder, Orso explodes. He throws the remains of his third Italian beef at the TV, then lumbers out of his throne and outside to smoke. He keeps promising his wife and his doctor he's quit, but there are instances of injustice that can only be assuaged by what he insists on calling 'smoky treats'.



My phone lights up: —*The Hair Museum is looking for you*

I made the appointment weeks ago, but now, standing in front of the mirrored door of an office building in a strip-mall parking lot, I'm about to give up. I knock to no response, then walk around back to look for another entrance. No one would ever take this for a museum.

Another text follows saying she's on her way.

A cream-colored 80s Cadillac Brougham pulls into the lot. A small woman with an impeccably-set blond helmet of hair gets out and greets me with a smile, then unlocks the mirrored door and beckons me in.

We walk through a large room dotted with barber's chairs, hairdryers, carts and carts of beauty products, and more mirrors than I could count. At the back of the space is another door that the woman unlocks.

Inside is a small reception area hung floor to ceiling with antique shadowbox frames. In each frame are wreaths, decorations, landscapes, and designs I can't define. All made of hair.

She traces the art of hairwork back to at least the 1500s but believes it goes back much earlier. Not only has she collected hair decorations and jewelry for over forty years, but she has also managed to learn many of the arthritis-inducing techniques necessary to complete these creations. Flowers, figures, and animals, all made of knots and stitches of multicolored tresses. She points out each skill she's mastered as we make our way around the lobby. She says she knows thirty techniques while five others have thus far eluded her. She leaves no doubt by her tone that it's only a matter of time until she knows them all. We continue into the back room. Every square inch of wall space is spoken for. In the middle of the room, glass cases hold rings, necklaces, brooches, and reliquaries, all decorated with human or animal hair.

Some were made to memorialize a loved one's passing, others to celebrate impending nuptials, while still others' intent is a complete mystery. She has traveled the world to find items for her museum. Her single-minded passion for the subject of hairwork is awe-inspiring.

She won't give her collection to the Smithsonian—though they keep asking—because she wants to make sure that people can easily see her treasures. She doesn't want them shut away in some climate-controlled safe forever. She's also writing a book about the history of hairwork. In the meantime, she offers to teach me the thirty techniques she's mastered. I thank her for the tour and say I'll think about it.

I dodge hurtling traffic crossing the thoroughfare the hair museum sits by and go into Popeye's for lunch. I look back across the road at the mirrored building. The Cadillac is gone. No signs of life, nor even a nameplate to break up the reflecting façade to clue in passing motorists about what's inside.

I'm horrified when a friend tells me he was inspired to start drawing after watching Carey do it on TV. But why should I be? Just because he treated me like dogshit? Bad people don't always make good art. Often, but not always. The guy's awful art is proof-positive that anyone can do it. And many will.

The show is called *A*R*Time w/ Timothy* and it's a bonafide hit, if social media is to be believed. But I can't bring myself to even watch the trailer. All the shit that fucker's put me through has soured me on his schtick. Even if he's made the next *Honeymooners*, I'd rather imagine my own version.

—*How the fuck am I supposed to make happy clouds with this crew of dipshits? They'd fuck up a wet dream.*

Carey's in a state. The big room is a hurricane blight of art supplies, video cameras, lights, and terrified young people. We're gathered in the apartment above the Albatross to film the pilot episode. A cable channel has given Carey a bunch of money in the hopes he'll become the next Bob Ross. What they fail to account for is their talent is closer to John Wayne Gacy than Mr. Rogers. I don't know why I'm here. Carey wanted me to stretch a bunch of canvases, but I pretended I was busy. Then he said it would be good for my article about him to watch the master at work.

Carey tells anyone who will listen he's painted all his life. He wants the set to be an exotic tropical island. Never mind we're in a shitty Chicago apartment above a tavern. He wants to be Gauguin and give all the island girls the syph. Okay, maybe that's unfair. He just wants to fuck all of them and have their fathers thank him for it as if he was doing their families the ultimate honor. Oh, yeah, and daub a few marks on some canvases on breaks from the boudoir.

Right now he's cornered a tattooed art girl, here as a PA for course credit from the Art Institute. She looks uncomfortable but maintains a smile not to upset the great man. I'm not close enough to catch the bullshit lines he's feeding her. If he gets her to leave with him tonight, I won't be surprised. Is this the kind of thing he wants me to include in my *Repeater* profile?

*A*R*Time w/Timothy* is a dog-and-pony show. A nostalgia trip fashioned to capitalize on Carey's fans' sympathy and good feelings for what he used to be. They remember hearing him blowing his horn decades ago. They have to squint hard as he playacts around his tropical island stage set, doing his Gauguin bit. But no matter how high they get as they watch, nothing can nullify what they know deep down: that their hero is pushing cubic zirconium down their throats. How much will they swallow? He'll keep mining until the last rube stuffs his credit card back in his pocket and backs away.

PRESS RELEASE

Orso, our most celebrated chronicler of creatures in the civic sphere, is announcing his retirement from museum exhibitions. He will no longer grace the walls of our city's most hallowed halls with his creations. It is not a lack of inspiration or energy that has brought the great man to this momentous decision. Rather, it is from a place of gratitude and with boundless generosity that he has deemed this the moment to step away from the spotlight. To cede center stage to those obscured up to now by his imposing all-engulfing shadow. It is their time to shine in the light that Orso is justly credited with making burn so brightly.

Having recently completed his most ambitious public work to date, a 5 X life-size grizzly, fabricated by the finest artisans of all four continents, Orso desires to quit at the apex, rather than awaiting the inevitable diminishment of his powers. Even a protean force must acknowledge that time is its master. Contrary to scurrilous accounts published in the Chicago Repeater—litigation pending—Orso is not walking away now due to despair over the city's unfortunate choice to erect a ten-storey parking structure directly in front of his epic new sculpture (a gift to the citizenry from one of its most prominent citizens). No, being a big-picture thinker, always concerned with the welfare of his community and culture, Orso has realized for some time that there's a time and place for an artist, no matter their eminence, importance, or skill, to let the next generation shine.

As a wise and forward-looking soul, Orso knows that the success of the young can't help but reflect well on himself. To that end, he has hand-picked his successors. Culled from a long line of assistants, helpers, interns, and recognized and unrecognized progeny, this cohort is carefully calibrated to guarantee our city's art dominance in the coming century. Years of toil under his demanding, yet benevolent hand have conditioned these young geniuses to forge their own iconoclastic paths, while always paying tribute to the man who made it all possible for them.

And lest anyone despair, Orso will not entirely disappear from public life. He plans to continue to sit on civic boards, accept public accolades, and occasionally dabble in the arts for purposes of fundraising and spiritual uplift. He has hinted he may even deviate from his sole, lifelong subject, the noble bear. After the tape recorders have been turned off, he reclines in his overstuffed chair and muses on what it might be like to fashion a whale. He summons an ugly little child with an asymmetric magenta hairdo—heretofore invisible to the reporters—and barks out orders on what to draw on his official iPad...

A sanctuary for retired circus bears is also in the works.

On our way out of the south entrance of the Field Museum, after looking at Greek antiquities, we notice what looks like a twelve foot column of crap just to the left of the door. Coming closer to read the wall label we're surprised to recognize the artist's name: _____.

A few more of _____'s makings line the parking lot. Their sight inspire my friend—who's a few years older and came of age during _____'s musical heyday—to launch into a diatribe against the man and his music. I do my best to defend him, saying his light horn stylings are mostly harmless. Right now, in virtually every



thrift-store in America, you can pick up gently-used copies of a dozen of his best-selling LPs. Could all those folks have been wrong?

The turd towers are actually called “Spirit Totems” and are inspired by seeing the Native American sculpture of the Pacific Northwest. _____ has apparently been making paintings and sculptures for forty-five years, when not busy selling 75 million albums, running a record label, and being a world-renowned philanthropist. In the few news items I can find about the exhibit, these pieces are repeatedly referred to as “frozen smoke”. Smoke’s not the frozen substance that comes to mind when confronted with them in the flesh.

We wonder aloud how much it cost to cast these things in bronze. Tens of thousands of dollars. And how did they end up gracing our natural history museum? _____ is quoted as being thrilled to exhibit there but offers little detail about how it all came to pass. There is no mention of the pieces on the Field’s website.

I pass an exhibit of the late actor Anthony Quinn’s art displayed on the ground floor of the Hellenic Museum in Greektown nearly every day on the Halsted bus. You can easily track down Madonna’s filmic efforts online. Molly Ringwald’s jazz records and James Franco’s books too. Failed actors become presidents, so why can’t a successful bandleader be a sculptor? Is it sour grapes and envy that makes the unfamous get mad about this? Stars have most of the pie, so when they reach for the crumbs at the edges of the pan, it looks gross to us. But what would someone like me do with even a faint glimmer of glory? I’d fuck it up without doubt. So maybe I should shut up and let _____ build towers of shit up to the heavens, put my head down, and keep walking.

I pitch the article all over the place. No one will bite. Every editor in the country has dealt with either Orso or Carey and doesn't care to relive the experience. The *Chicago Repeater* is the local alternative weekly. Not exactly the *Times* but not quite a hobbyist's blog either. They're the only ones interested and I've convinced myself that my article has to see print. That I'll be correcting some wrong with my brave words.

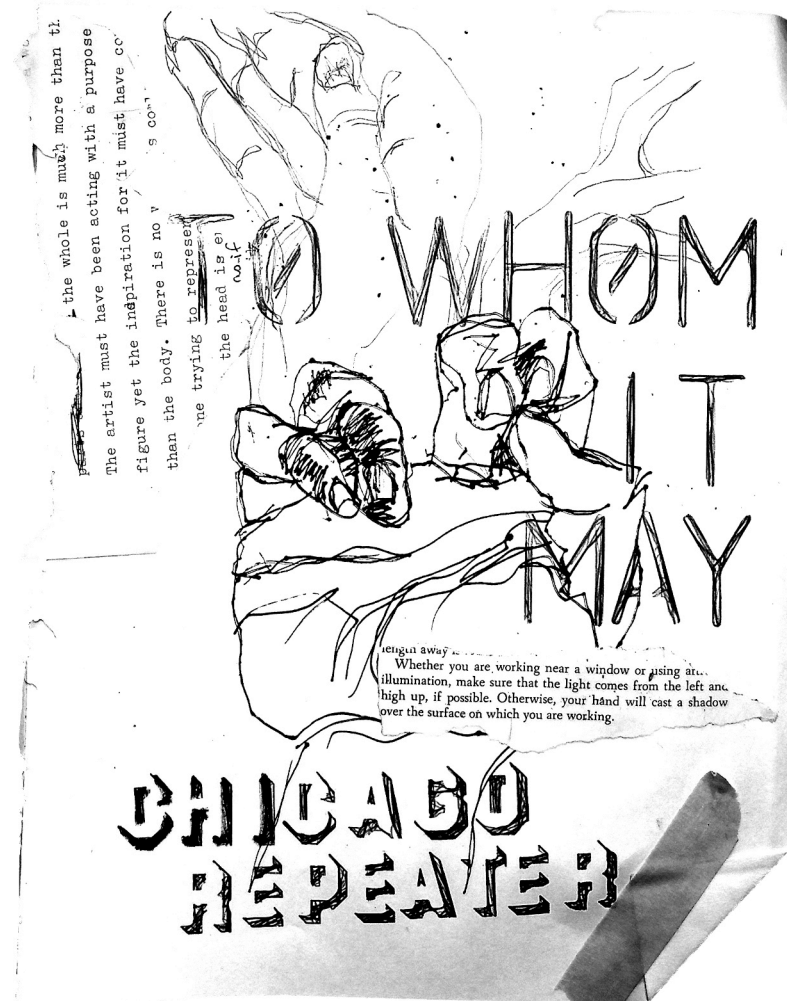
Going back and forth with Carey about the stalker, his illness, the *Chicagoan* article, his switch from music to painting, as well as his myriad gripes, is not unlike a twelve-round bout. I know I just have to stay on my feet and absorb the punishment to reap the reward.

Orso's a different animal. With him it's not a boxing match nor a high-wire act. It's an endurance contest. Like one of those 64oz steak challenges. I have to keep swallowing his blather to extract a few calories of nutrition. The man won't shut up. He doesn't need listeners, just a general direction to aim the hose. He goes and goes. In the year I worked on the article I never determined whether he truly believed a single thing that came out of his mouth.

My twin subjects never interacted in person so far as I know. There was the odd like or comment on this or that platform, but no face-to-face meetings. No comparing notes. I got the impression that they were wary of one another. Like they knew there wouldn't be enough space to accommodate the hot air each required to survive day to day were they to share a room.

I read everything they ever said publicly. I have word files cut-and-pasted from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. Even MySpace and Friendster. I'm determined not to repeat what has been printed before. I want mine to be the last word on the subject.

But what *is* the subject?



Every artist ever thinks they don't get their due. That they're misunderstood. In this way, Carey and Orso are utterly ordinary. They'd be horrified to hear this and would never believe it. They both think they're doing the big work. Just ask them. But it's one of oldest art tools in the toolbox to cast yourself apart, to feel alienated. Some would say it's impossible to create anything worthwhile otherwise.

So what is it I'm trying to say about these guys. Two whales in what they take to be a kiddie pool. After months of interviews, sleepless nights of reading, marathon revisions, I have a piece of writing that the subjects have signed off on. It will be a front page story. My first. I might even get paid a not-insignificant chunk of change.

I hand in my draft to the editor at the *Repeater* and wait. A week later her version arrives in my inbox. Skimming it I know we're in trouble. One of the major conditions of Orso's and Carey's cooperation is that their statements are relayed as fact rather than opinion. I know this is ridiculous and contradicts basic journalistic ethics, but it's the only way they'd talk to me. When dealing with madmen you have to accept the underlying premise of their insanity in order to keep their tongues flapping. It's the only way you'll get anything out of them. I wrote the article in such a way that a half-smart reader could read between the lines. What the editor did by adding those 'he said's, 'according to's, and 'they claim's is call the windbags' credibility into question.

I write her and convey my misgivings. Say there will be serious blowback. She replies not to worry. To be proud of the good job I did. That my piece will be next week's cover story. Asks if I can make some art to use with it. I try to convince myself she's right, but feel uneasy. Then I make my fatal mistake: I forward the editor's version to Carey and Orso. The shitstorm rises within seconds and doesn't recede for several days.

I have hundreds of emails saved on an external drive from these harrowing days. They insult me every way they can think of, tell me how I betrayed them, put them in danger. Then there's the cease-and-desist letter from their attorneys. The *Repeater* is cc'd on most of these communications. For the first couple days they insist the article will go up as is. But by the time the lawyers get involved the editor relents.

Carey tells me to go shoot myself. I cease communications with him after that.

The final break with Orso comes after I accidentally send an email venting about him to the man himself. Needless to say, my assessment is not appreciated. I apologize but don't walk back the gist of the original message. We're no longer of any use to one another, so the break is for the best.

I get the article killed. It isn't easy and I don't want to, but I do it. After spending half a year of my life trying to get these two clowns to trust me, agreeing to all their absurd conditions, and writing a thing I'm not thrilled with but that they bless, it has to be destroyed.

The *Repeater* doesn't threaten or suggest violence, but neither is there any encouragement or consolation. Now other articles I had in the pipeline are no longer needed. There just isn't any space for them, the editor insists. The hair museum, crap columns, jazz night tribute, a half dozen others are all canceled. But I know the truth. I ruined their week so I'm being punished. Never mind that no writer would ever ask to have something they work on six months be killed unless there's no other option.

There *is* no other option.



You admire the monster from a safe distance. There are metal bars, miles, centuries separating *you* from *it*. Then, one day, you squeeze your face between the bars to get a better look. The monster's wary, but you come back every day. Sing it songs. Bring it gifts. Soon it starts inviting you inside the cage. This is amazing. You believe you're friends with what was once only myth. Months, years pass. The monster now knows your wife's name. You exchange Christmas cards. Then the day comes the monster invites you to stay the night in its cage. You're flattered and accept. You brag to all your friends.

The next morning, you wake up with your arm chewed off.

Who's to blame?

You knew it was a monster.

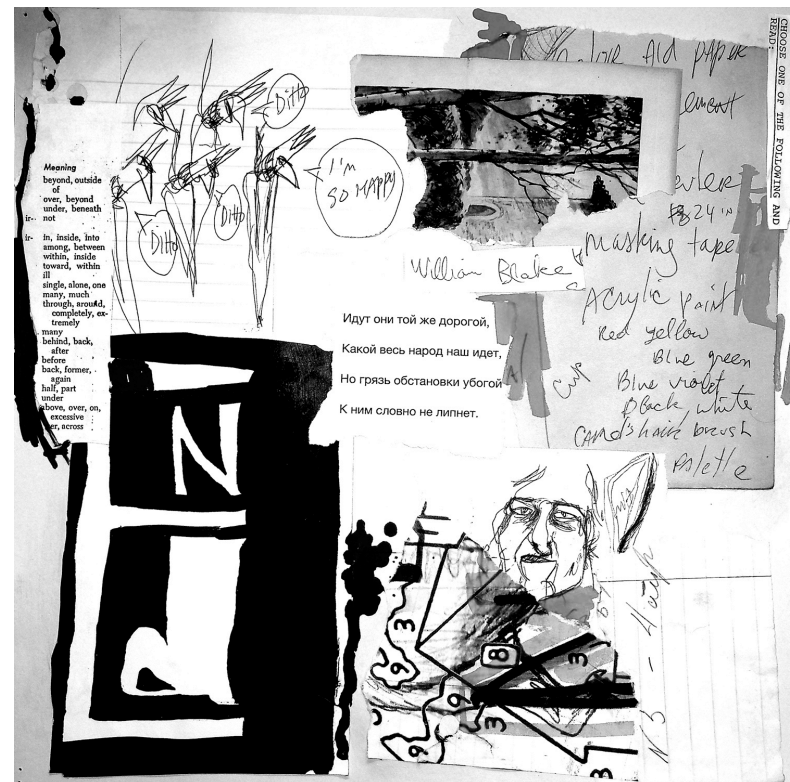
What did you expect?

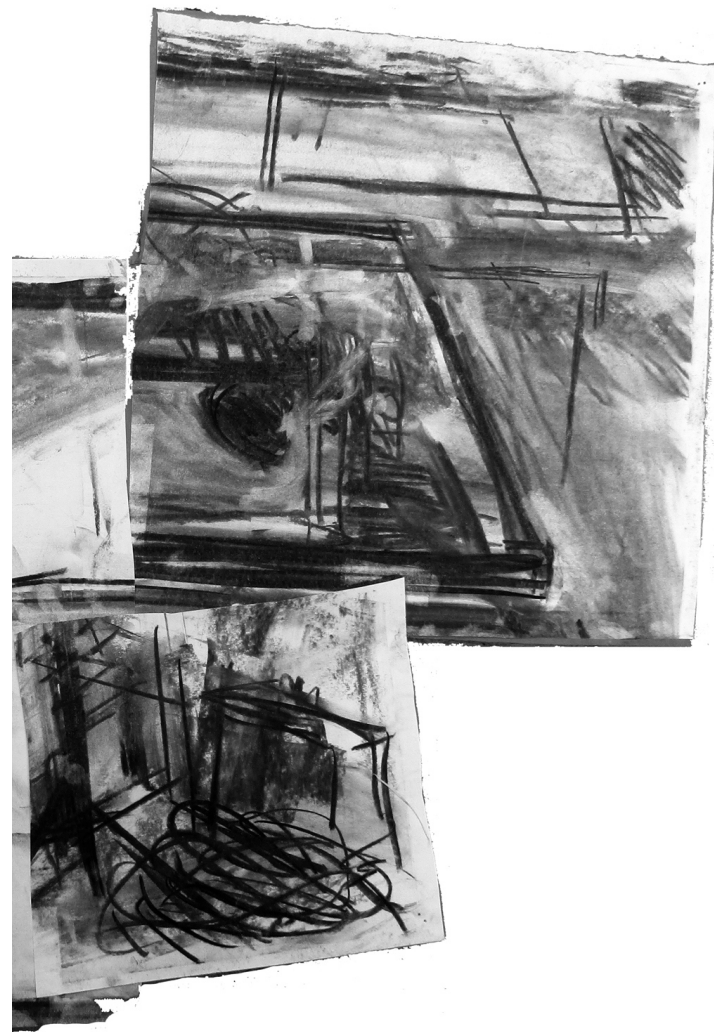
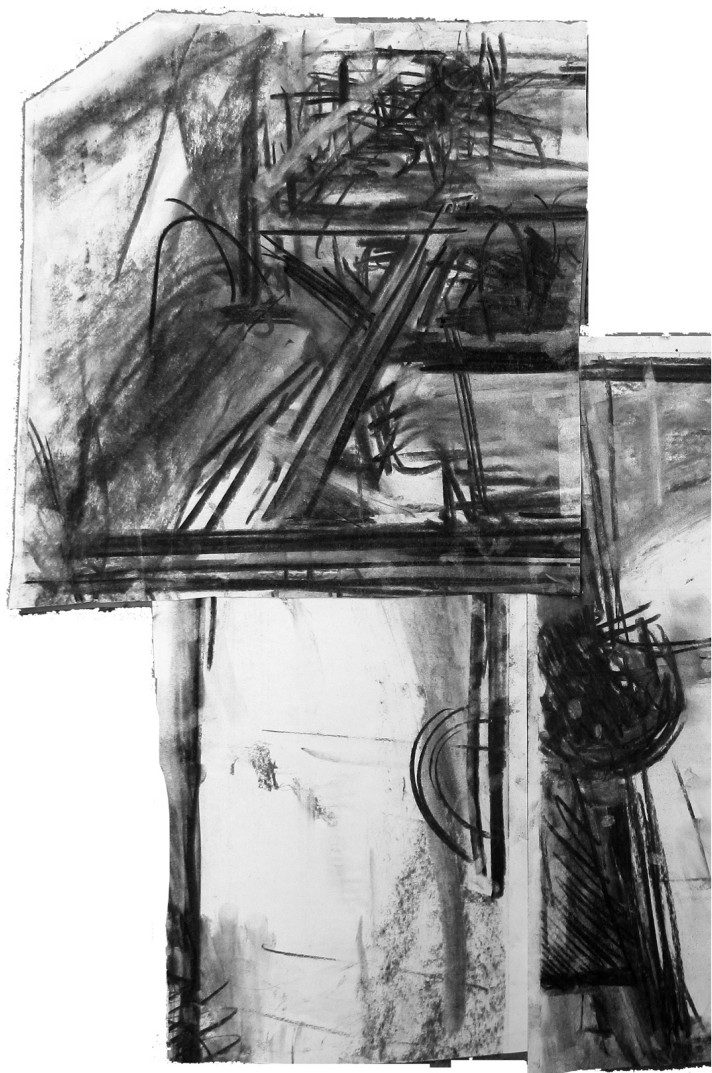
Dmitry Samarov was born in Moscow, USSR in 1970. He never set out to write anything but can't seem to stop now. His first book, *Hack—Stories from a Chicago Cab* (University of Chicago Press) came out in 2011. It was followed by another taxi-related book published on a small press run by a crook. Then, after a fallow period, Samarov restarted his book-making habit in 2019 with *Music to My Eyes* (Tortoise Books) and *Soviet Stamps* (Pictures&Blather). Then doubled down with *All Hack* (Pictures&Blather) in 2020 and *Old Style* (Pictures&Blather) in 2021. An abridged audio version of the book in your hands was released by Hello America Stereo Cassette in June 2022.

Samarov contributes art, film, theater, and book reviews regularly to the *Chicago Reader* and occasionally lends his byline elsewhere. He co-hosts *That Horrorcast* with Mallory Smart and interviews interesting people at *hu u no*. Both shows can be found at finer podcast purveyors the world over.

An absurdly thorough archive of Samarov's artwork can be found at dmitrysamarov.com. Sign up for his newsletter there. He hasn't missed a week in years.

He will always be grateful to each and every viewer, reader, or listener who spends even a moment with his work.





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